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Andrew M. Davis

Sermon Notes

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Don't Flaunt Your Freedoms, But Walk in Love

Romans 14:13-15

Introduction: The Problem of Balance

Charles Blondin (28 February 1824 – 19 February 1897), French tight-rope walker and acrobat, was born at St Omer, France. His real name was Jean François Gravelet.

He especially owed his celebrity and fortune to his idea of crossing Niagara Falls on a tight-rope, 1100 ft. long, 160 ft. above the water. This he accomplished, first in 1859, a number of times,

Amazed people when suddenly in the middle of the tighrope he did a perfect somersault

always with different theatric variations: blindfold, in a sack, trundling a wheelbarrow, on stilts, sitting down midway while he made and ate an omelette.

Used frequently as an illustration of true faith: "Do you believe I am able to push a man in a wheelbarrow across the Niagara Falls?"

Amazing illustration of BALANCE

Inner ear

Leaning too far to left or right

Disaster waiting at every step

In a similar way I see an amazing balance and precision in Romans 14, and it is so because the church is going to face different challenges, have to overcome different obstacles

1. GOSPEL FREEDOM: Concern about understanding the freedoms Christ has won us, the church needs to understand the gospel of grace and walk in the freedom of a child of God rather than a slave... THE GREAT DANGER OF LEGALISM
2. GOSPEL PURITY: Concern about sin and worldliness on the one hand... the church needs to help its members know how to keep itself from being polluted by the world... THE GREAT DANGER OF SIN
3. GOSPEL UNITY: Concern about arrogant judgmentalism on another hand, the church needs to help its members set their own rules and regulations about daily issues without facing judgment from other members... LOVING CHRISTIAN UNITY... SWEET FELLOWSHIP

These three concerns have to be kept in balance: purity, loving unity, freedom

I. Stop Passing Judgment

A. Paul's Summary

1. Romans 14:1-12
2. Issue is "Debatable Matters"
3. Gray areas of Christian lifestyle and conviction
 - a. Example #1: Ceremonially unclean food
 - b. Example #2: Sacred days (perhaps including the Sabbath)
4. Two-fold problem in the Christian body
 - a. More mature believers understanding the freedom Christ has bought us from the ceremonial law, have a tendency to ridicule and look down upon those who still have scruples about these things
 - b. Less mature believers have the tendency to JUDGE other Christians who exercise freedom in these matters
 - c. Paul is addressing both parties
5. Paul's Goal: genuine unity for the sake of the gospel
6. Foundational principle: Christ is Lord of all
 - a. Judgmentalism is destroyed
 - i) Christ alone has won the right to judge us all
 - ii) Who are you to judge someone else's servant?

iii) Triumph of the grace of the gospel

Romans 14:4 Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

b. Weak faith also destroyed: HE WILL STAND

i) Legalism produces insecurity

ii) If you look at the Christian life like a legalistic list of do's and don'ts you'll be utterly miserable, because you won't be sure if you've done enough to please the Lord

c. ON THE OTHER HAND: License is destroyed

i) We are not free to live however we want if that means worldliness and sin

ii) Someday each of us must stand before Christ, our King and our Judge and give Him a full account of our lives

7. Therefore, a thorough meditation on the achievement of Christ at the cross frees us from legalism and license, and provides the ground for true Christian unity

B. Direct Command Against Passing Judgment

Romans 14:12-13 So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. ¹³ Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.

1. After setting the context, Paul directly forbids passing judgment
2. How quick we are to judge others, to assess them, to think we have all the facts
3. Here the command is given universally
4. The greatest danger is that we will lose the humility that grace should instruct us to have... we forget that we also are sinners saved by grace and are no better than the person we're judging

Matthew 7:1-2 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ² For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Romans 2:1 You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.

5. The second greatest danger is that the Body of Christ will be rent asunder by a carping, harsh, judgmental spirit
6. This is the issue Paul then turns to: the danger of a full exercise of Christian freedom
7. The deeper problem here is that Christians forget that we are brothers and sisters, all members of one family, saved by the grace of God and the blood of Jesus Christ... that the gospel puts all of us on equal footing, adopted into the same family, unite with Christ
8. To view the Body of Christ less than this is to do great damage to God's saving purpose in the world
9. Christ intended to put the growing unity of the Church on display as great evidence of the truth of the gospel
10. If we're judging each other, that unity is destroyed
11. If we're flaunting our freedoms and destroying our brother by our freedoms, that unity is also destroyed
12. Paul wants to maintain three things for the glory of God and the salvation of the elect who are watching us: gospel purity from sin, gospel freedom from legalism, and gospel unity from divisions
13. Why? Because a pure, healthy, happy, united church is the ordained weapon of choice in the hands of the Holy Spirit for the completion of the redemption plan of God

II. Determine Not to Cause Your Brother to Stumble

vs. 13 Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.

A. Play on Words: Not One "Judgment" But Another

1. Two uses of the same Greek word "judge"
2. We are NOT to judge our brother... to decide whether or not he's a Christian based on these disputable matters
3. We ARE to judge our own behavior, or better, to make a settled determination, a decision about our lifestyle
4. Similar use of the Greek verb in 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 2:2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

- a. Paul “judged” “resolved” “decided” “made a settled determination” about his preaching strategy in Corinth
 - b. He resolved not to use any superior eloquence, or polished words, or human techniques
 - c. He resolved, settled, determined ahead of time that he would focus exclusively on the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified
5. Here also Paul is advocating a settled attitude toward our brothers and sisters in Christ
6. It is a commitment we make toward our brothers and sisters, not to do anything that would cause them to stumble

B. Determination Not to Cause Your Brother to Stumble

- 1. “Stumbling block” = something that causes someone to sin
 - a. Image is of one running a race for the glory of God
 - b. Suddenly something trips the runner up and he falls

Illus. Cross country running... our course was the longest and most challenging in our league... towards the end of the race we had to run down a steep hill over some exposed tree roots; at that part of the race, you were tired; if your concentration wavered for even an instant, one of those roots could easily trip you up, and your fall would be dramatic and painful

That is the image here... a stumbling block is something that causes someone to fall into sin

- 2. Greek word related to “scandal”... perhaps like being “scandalized”, “shocked”
- 3. Paul’s great concern here is that the strong brother who has freedom and liberty in Christ to do many things may actually be used by the devil to tempt his brother and lead him into sin
- 4. Jesus’ strong teaching on things that lead us to sin

Luke 17:1-2 He said to His disciples, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come, but woe to him through whom they come! ² "It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he would cause one of these little ones to stumble.

- 5. So this is a warning concerning the very freedoms that Paul has been discussing

- a. The gospel comes and liberates us from all those Old Testament regulations
- b. We can eat anything, drink anything
- c. We can worship anywhere anytime
- d. EVEN BETTER we are free from that whole way of living, of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience

Galatians 3:11-13 *Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." ¹² The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."*

6. But now, there is a different issue: your weak brother, who doesn't fully understand gospel liberty and the power of grace, may be destroyed, led into sin, crushed, harmed, defiled in some way by your open exercise of freedom

III. Paul's Example: Eating "Unclean" Food

Romans 14:14-15 *As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. ¹⁵ If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.*

A. Unclean Foods Again

1. Old Covenant law designated some foods "clean" and other foods "unclean"
2. Jesus however, declared all foods "clean"
3. With the coming of the New Covenant, we are free to eat anything we choose anytime we choose

B. Paul's Remarkable Journey in Christ

"I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself"

1. Paul far more zealous for traditions than Peter
2. Peter had a vision three times that showed him how God's grace had cleaned not only animals but people as well

Acts 10:11-15 *He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. ¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get*

up, Peter. Kill and eat." ¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." ¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

3. Paul had become convinced of the same truth... educated directly by the Lord Jesus
4. Never underestimate the power of doctrine to change lifestyle
5. Paul was so zealous for this new freedom that he publicly rebuke Peter for his hypocritical behavior concerning eating with Gentile believers

C. New Controversy: Meat Sacrificed to Idols

1. Pagan worship very sensual and pleasing to the flesh
2. Sexual immorality woven together with meat sacrificed to idols
3. Before refrigeration, the most frequent times people would eat meat was in connection with sacrifice
4. Pagan worship had at its core the offering of meat to this or that god or goddess
5. It was a consistent lifestyle, and when someone came to Christ, it was essential for them to break away from the wickedness
6. But along came another question: could the meat still be eaten, even if one didn't participate in any way with the pagan religion? What about meat sold in the marketplace, that you know nothing about? You have an instinct that it was probably offered to an idol, but what should you do? What about a mystery dish offered to you at the home of an unbeliever?
7. Paul's more thorough answer in 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1
 - a. Idols are nothing... they are merely chunks of stone with no reality behind them
 - b. Meat offered to them is not in any way intrinsically defiled... no pollution is added to the meat itself
 - c. So, we are free to eat anything we want... IF WE ARE ALONE and no one is affected by our freedom

D. Deeper Issue: Conscience

1. The food itself is fine... but a person's conscience may be defiled

Romans 14:14 But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.

2. If someone regards the meat as defiled, then for him it IS defiled
3. If his conscience is bothering him and he goes ahead and eats, he is SINNING
4. If he keeps violating his conscience, soon his conscience will be seared and he will begin sinning in ways that everyone recognizes are sinful
5. This is a remarkable teaching... it shows how something can be true for one person and not for another
6. It shows the complexities of personal experience, of personal memory
7. Sin defiles us all, but it defiles us all in different ways
 - a. One person may be able to walk through a mall and not be affected whatsoever by the lust-producing images that surround him; another man, whose past still binds him in certain ways, does not have that freedom
 - b. One person, whose appetite is well-under control, can eat at Golden Corral and take just enough for himself... he is not tempted at all by unlimited food; someone else cannot help but stuff himself sinful
 - c. One woman can read romance novels and not sin, not covet a different husband or yearn for a wild romantic fling; another woman cannot
 - d. Jesus made us each judge of what causes us to stumble... it is all based on what sin has done to you in the past

Matthew 5:29-30 If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

- i) A right eye is a gift of God under ordinary circumstances... so is a right hand
- ii) BUT if either one of them causes you to sin, you must cut it off and throw it away
- e. Thus did Jesus make it plain that we each stumble in different ways
- f. We must police ourselves, know what causes us to stumble into sin
8. Paul's staggering point here: you are not only responsible for yourself in this battle, but also for your Christian brothers and sisters
 - a. Christian love means we would rather give up some of our gospel freedoms than to cause someone else to stumble and fall into sin

- b. Conscience is a gift of God that prompts us not to do certain things... conscience isn't perfect... it only goes as far as our knowledge takes us
- c. The "weak brother" may never really come into his full gospel freedoms; as long as his conscience is defiled, you must refrain from acting however you choose

IV. Do Not Destroy Your Brother with Your Freedom

Romans 14:15 If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.

A. "Am I My Brother's Keeper?"

1. Cain's cold-hearted murderous attitude toward Able
2. "Am I my brother's keeper" literally "Am I my brother's guardian" or "shepherd"
3. Romans 14 brings us to a whole new level of brotherly love: YES, you are guardians and shepherds of each other's souls
4. If a brother or sister is distressed or pained or caused to stumble in any way by my exercise of Christian freedom, I MUST STOP
5. We don't have to eat that meat or drink that wine or listen to that music or watch that movie or go to that ball game or wear that clothes style
6. It means that we are concerned about the effect of our actions on our Christian community...
7. It means we have to stop thinking so individualistically about our rights and privileges

B. Acting In Love

1. The essence of love is sacrifice for the benefit of someone else
2. The measure of love is HOW MUCH we are willing to sacrifice for the benefit of someone else
3. Paul calls on Christians literally "to walk in love"

C. Causing a Brother Pain, or "Destroying" Him

1. Paul uses two strong words to describe the effect of a brother flaunting his freedoms

- a. “Distressed” in the NIV is “grieved” in KJV, ESV or “hurt” in NASB or even “injured” in RSV

Same word used concerning the Holy Spirit’s response to our sin:

Ephesians 4:30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

- b. Temptation is like a flaming arrow... and if your brother is led into sin because of your free exercise, you have wounded him greatly
- c. He has been struggling with the old patterns of sin; he barely has a handle on it; he has not yet learned to live in Christian freedom from sin
- d. He sees you confidently eating, drinking, and yet his understanding and heart are not where they should be
- e. He will follow your example, but do so VIOLATING HIS CONSCIENCE
- f. Later in Romans 14 Paul will give a striking definition of sin:

Romans 14:23 But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

- g. Your brother will not be acting in faith, so he is sinning, even though he’s doing exactly what you are doing!
2. Paul also speaks of “destroying your brother”
- a. The Greek word here does not refer to eternal destruction in hell
 - b. NO... if Christ died for Him, it would UNJUST of God to make that same person also suffer in hell for sins Christ suffered for on the cross
 - c. The “destroying” Paul has in mind here is the devastating consequence of him violating his own conscience... for that is SIN
 - d. The man’s peace is destroyed, the man’s joy is destroyed, the man’s conscience may be destroyed if he keeps it up, and so the man’s witness and service to Christ may be destroyed
 - e. And all of that for food? It hardly seems worth it!

D. Voluntarily Reducing Your Freedoms

- 1. Paul is calling on Christians to restrict their own freedoms for the sake of the love and for the sake of the gospel

2. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul addresses this issue of the freedoms he had as an apostle

1 Corinthians 9:1-5 Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? ... Don't we have the right to food and drink? ⁵ Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us...?

3. He had the freedom to eat anything he wanted, drink anything he wanted, take a Christian wife, receive pay for his apostolic work
4. BUT he purposefully restricted his own freedoms for the sake of the gospel

1 Corinthians 9:12 If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.

5. So it is when you are a Christian who loves his brothers or sisters... you should not flaunt your freedoms, but rather should act in love for the sake of the gospel

E. Goal: Christian Unity in Holiness

1. Paul's desire is a healthy Christian church... united in holiness
2. He is so zealous about holiness here, that he says that even if God is not offended by anything we put in our mouth, yet if YOU THINK HE IS and do it anyway, then for you it is sin
3. Paul wants us to care about each other, look out for each other, build a Christian community in which we take each other's holiness and clear conscience seriously

V. Do Not Spoil Your Freedoms by Flaunting Them

Romans 14:16 Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil.

A. The Power of Human Words

1. Paul's concern here: the power of human words to defile and pollute
2. In verse 13 he urged the stronger brother not to put a STUMBLING BLOCK in the brother's path... one of the ways the weaker brother might stumble would be to attack your freedom verbally... to judge you openly for a good gift God has given you
3. The Greek word is "blasphemeo", translated "blaspheme" or "slander"
4. The power of the human tongue to destroy is on Paul's mind

James 3:7-8 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, ⁸ but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

The poison of the tongue is devastating... and here it is connected to legitimate freedoms

B. The Danger of Flaunting Freedom: Hearing Slander

1. God grants you the freedom of food, of drink, of legitimate earthly joys and celebrations
2. BUT if you flaunt certain freedoms in front of others, it may provoke them to develop evil thoughts in their hearts and slander you and the freedom
3. Paul is concerned about the good gift itself here... the gift of a free life in Christ, enjoying all the good things God has

C. Good Gifts Gone Bad

1. Once the weaker brother slanders your freedom, it will be hard for you to enjoy it to the glory of God
2. You might do it out of spite in his face
3. Or you might begin to doubt yourself whether this is a good gift, and if you have doubts and eat, you will sin
4. The ultimate end of all this is an extreme legalism, an asceticism which reduces God's beautiful world with all of its flavors and sights and sounds and sensations to a drab stone cell in a monastery somewhere in which you try to simulate hell on earth while fearfully seeking to avoid hell in eternity

Paul warns about false teachers who teach this kind of asceticism:

1 Timothy 4:3-5 They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. ⁴ For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

If you flaunt your freedom you may lose it!

VI. Application

A. Walk in Love Toward Your Christian Brothers and Sisters

1. Care about their sin problems; care about their struggles; help them to be holy, not to violate their consciences

2. Walk in love every day... think like a family member, not like a lone maverick
3. Be concerned about how they are seeing your choices

B. Understand Your Christian Freedom

1. You are adopted as a child of God
2. You are not being scrutinized by a disapproving employer who might fire you the moment you mess up
3. Your relationship with God is not based on keeping a bunch of legalistic requirements
4. God has created a marvelous world full of good gifts: eating, drinking, music, colors, sounds, marriage, sex, children, friendships, etc.
5. Paul calls it a doctrine of demons to prohibit good gifts that God has given

C. BUT Understand Also the Danger of Worldliness

1. Grace cannot be a cover-up for evil
2. Sin is still sin; anytime you violate one of God's moral commandments, you are damaging yourself and in some degree the whole body of Christ
3. We live in a time in which asceticism and legalism are not the major threat... immorality and cheap grace and constant pleasure-seeking are
4. I have sought to be faithful to the message of freedom in Romans 14... but don't forget Jesus' warning:

Matthew 5:29-30 If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

D. Don't Flaunt Your Freedoms: Some Present-Day Applications

1. Most of us do not struggle with the issue of meat sacrificed to idols
2. How then DOES this relate?
3. Don't flaunt your freedom about alcohol... not very likely in a Baptist church, but there are some among you who are convinced that drinking wine is not in itself a sin... but be very careful about how you carry that freedom in front of others, or even how you talk about it

4. Tender word of counsel to our sisters: be very careful how you dress
 - a. We are not legalistic Muslims who make their women wear burkhas
 - b. However, we obviously all agree that a woman wearing a bikini to church would be sinning and causing many of her brothers in Christ great distress and pain
 - c. So there is a proper ground somewhere
 - d. Popular styles are always pushing the limits on clothing... going to more and more revealing of skin
 - e. Dear sister, could you consider the consciences of your brothers when you choose your wardrobe? Ask, "Is it likely that this garment could cause any of my Christian brothers to stumble?" If so, don't choose it!
5. Don't flaunt your freedom about entertainment... movies, DVDs cable, etc. Be absolutely sure that you're not watching things that violate your own conscience, because if you do you're sinning even if no one else is there; but there may be other movies that are okay for you but troubling for someone else
6. Live a life of freedom, but don't use that freedom as a cover-up for evil... live as a holy child of God in the family of God