



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Romans 14:13-23

Romans

"Servant of All"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our text this morning is Romans 14, verses 13 through 23. Paul has been addressing a problem in the church of Rome, a problem of division between the weak and the strong. The weak are those who have scruples about certain things. They have convictions, perhaps about eating meat. They don't feel they should do that. Perhaps it's a holdover from their background in Judaism.

The strong, they know that they're not under the law, that they're not bound by those regulations. They have no problem enjoying their freedom. So you can imagine there would be a conflict within the church of those who feel it's wrong to do certain things and those who feel free to do them. The weak were judging the strong and the strong were looking down on the weak. So Paul, in the first half of chapter 14, deals with this in terms of people's perceptions, their attitudes, the way they look at one another, and he gives correction on that.

Don't judge, don't despise, don't look down on the weaker, don't judge the stronger. And now, he takes up a different aspect of that problem. And that is dealing with the way we respond, the way we act toward one another. So he moves from the way we think to the way we act. And, primarily, he directs his attention to the strong.

Verse 13: "Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this – not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be

unclean, to him it is unclean. For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

May the Lord bless this reading of His Word. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, it is a blessing to come together on a Sunday morning and read the Scriptures, and we do pray that you will bless this reading of your Word. We have read your Scriptures; we have read your inerrant word. There's great value in that, great value in gathering as your people and reading the Scriptures. But we need to understand them, and we pray for guidance as we now consider them in some depth. And we pray that the Spirit of God would lead us in our understanding and make the proper applications to us.

We pray that, as the body of Christ, we would maintain the unity that you desire us to have. And we pray that we will seek the welfare of one another and that we will not engage in bickering over issues that really are not important, the nonessentials that Paul speaks of here. Food and drink are things that you are not concerned with. Things that you are concerned with are the internal things, the eternal things of righteousness and peace and joy. And that's what you have established in the hearts of your people.

That's the things that the kingdom of God is about, And we pray that they will be the things that we're about. The things that we concentrate on and that we give our attention to, and that we spread as we spread the gospel. So help us to be people who have our lives in proper focus, have the right perspective, concentrating on the right things. And help us this morning to do that, to gain a proper perspective on life.

And we can only have that by your grace, by the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God as He illuminates the Word of God, the Scriptures for us. So, Lord, we ask for that. We ask that you feed us and that you build us up. It's what Paul says that we are to do for one another. We are to seek the things of peace and building up of one another, and so, obviously, that's your will.

And we pray for your will, that it be done among us this morning. And give us a great appreciation of your grace and what you've done for us in Jesus Christ, and help us to live according to grace. Bless us spiritually. Bless us also materially, Father. We pray for the sick and we pray for those who are recovering from surgery.

We pray for those who are afflicted in various ways. We pray that you bless them. We pray that you give them encouragement in the midst of that. It can wear a person down, Father. Life can become very, very discouraging with – when health problems are chronic, or when unemployment seems to go on and on.

And it's very easy to get distracted, to lose hope, to become desperate. We pray that you would lift up your people who are going through those experiences and give them encouragement. Remind them that you're in control and they're to trust in you. And give them healing, give them relief, give them encouragement. Give them opportunities of work we pray.

You know the needs of our congregation, Father, far better than we do. Christ knows it well and He intercedes for us daily. We pray that you would bless us and pray that you would meet those needs.

We pray for our nation. We pray that you'd bless it. Bless our leaders with wisdom.

Bless our military and our allies as they prosecute a war abroad. We pray for success there, and we pray for protection for our leaders and our nation. And we pray that as people contemplate the danger of these times, the precarious nature of life, that they would realize that life is brief and life is uncertain as far as we're concerned, as far as we can see, and that it can end any moment. Give them an interest in spiritual things and eternal things, and use us to be the means, the agents of giving life and truth in the Gospels.

Make us people who desire to do that, who desire to spread your Word, who desire to advance the kingdom of God in this world. We pray that you bless us to that end. Bless our meeting this evening. May it honor Christ. And bless our time now. Bless us as we sing our final hymn. And prepare our hearts for study together, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] One of the famous paintings that hangs in the Louvre in Paris is Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*. I'm sure you've seen it. Liberty is a strong, bare-chested woman carrying a flag in one hand, a musket in the other, charging through smoke, stepping over bodies as she leads the citizens in battle. It's all about the virtue and the value of freedom, which Christians understand and appreciate, or should, because we have the greatest freedom, spiritual freedom in Christ. And sometimes when Christians value their freedom over everything else, the results are something like the scene in that painting.

A lot of people get stepped on and hurt in the name of liberty. Paul warns against that in our passage which is about Christian liberty. Paul was a great believer in it. He has been called the apostle of liberty. He told the Galatians it was for freedom that Christ set us free.

We are not under the ritual requirements of the law of Moses. And Paul encouraged Christians to live as free men. He encourages us

to practice our freedom. But Paul knew that there is a right way to do that and a wrong way to do that. That the right use of liberty is not reckless. It is restrained.

And that is what Paul insists on in the last half of Romans chapter 14. Martin Luther understood that. He understood liberty. He wrote on that subject. And he wrote, "A Christian man is a most free lord of all, and subject to none."

Paul would have agreed with that. But then Luther wrote in the next sentence, "A Christian man is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all." And Paul would have agreed with that also. It's this idea of being a servant of all that Paul now develops in our passage as he explains the proper use of Christian liberty. A Christian is most free of all, and subject to none.

But not all have a clear understanding of that. A young Jewish believer, for example, may have scruples about eating pork. He is free to do that. He is no longer under the kosher law. But to him it's still unclean, and he would sin by doing what he feels is wrong.

So all through the second half of Romans 14, Paul advises the strong Christian, the person who understands his freedom, to take account of that in the exercise of his freedom and still restrain. That's what he advises in verse 13. "Determine this – not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. Now, Paul repeats that again in verse 21. Don't "do anything by which your brother stumbles."

That is the basic exhortation of this passage. And by it, Paul means don't set an example that might lead another person to sin by doing something against his conscience that will injure him spiritually. Be responsible in the use of your liberty. Be thoughtful and watchful and filled with strength. It's not enough that a Christian knows what is right and what is permitted. It is important to know that, but it's not enough to know that.

He or she must also consider what the effects of doing it may have on other people. Bishop Handley Moule said, "Be severe with self, gentle with others." Now, he said that in regard to judging one

another. But the principle applies to the use of our freedom. Now, in verse 14, Paul reinforces the fact of Christian liberty and the Christian's right to enjoy his or her liberty.

He writes, "I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself." Paul is likely referring to the Lord's teaching in Mark 7:14-19 where it is stated that He declared all food clean. Paul taught the same thing in [1 Corinthians 4:4](#) where he wrote, "Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude." No food is evil in itself. Food is morally neutral.

As Christ said in His teaching in Mark 7, it's not what goes into the body that defiles but what comes out of the heart. The idea that certain foods or drinks are inherently evil is not a Christian idea. The Koran prohibits wine and it teaches that there is a devil in every berry of the grape. But the Bible doesn't teach that. Everything created by God is good.

So the strong, the people who understand their liberty, are right in their understanding of the Christian's relationship to food and their freedom to eat it. But Paul adds, to the person who thinks something is unclean, then it is unclean to him and he cannot eat it. And those who understand their liberty need to understand that. Not everybody is the same. We're all different.

Some people are able to grasp the truth and to live by it more quickly than others. Some people progress more rapidly in the Christian faith. Now, that is not necessarily an intellectual problem with the weak. In fact, the weak may have been very intelligent individuals. A person may understand that he or she is not under the law of Moses, understand that very clearly, but still have a difficult time giving up old traditions, particularly in a situation where an individual came out of a Jewish background with these convictions about food.

And the keeping of certain days was ingrained in their thinking from their youth up. So ideas, convictions, can have deep roots in a

person's heart and, therefore, be difficult to get rid of, to uproot. And the strong need to be aware of that so they won't bring about another person's spiritual downfall by insisting on exercising their freedom to eat or drink. Now, I think that's a particularly relevant exhortation for the day in which we live. Because we live in a time where people make a great deal about their rights.

Everybody is very sensitive about their rights and the exercise of their rights. And that's true in the church as well. Christians can be that way about their liberty and insist on using their freedoms, and do so by not being very careful about the way they use their freedoms or even, perhaps, making a deliberate show of their freedoms in order to shock the weaker Christian. Now, that may have been what was going on in Rome. It was not a wise use of Christian freedom, evidently, and Paul condemns that. And in verse 15 he gives the reasons why he condemns it and the reasons for acting with restraint in the use of our freedom.

The first has to do with love. It is not an act of love if by our behavior we influence a person to follow an example that will violate his or her conscience. We may have a right to eat or drink. We certainly do have that right. Paul reemphasizes that in our passage.

But if, by practicing our freedom, we thoughtlessly trample on a person's convictions, on their sensitive conscience, then Paul says we "are no longer walking according to love." Insisting on our rights at the expense of others is selfish. It's not an exercise of our Christian freedom. It's actually an act of self-indulgence. We are to put the interests of other people ahead of our own.

Now, the second reason we should be glad to restrict our freedom is the death of Christ. "Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died." Since Christ loves this other believer enough to give His life for him, we should be willing to give up our freedom for him. Since Christ died for his well-being, we should avoid hurting him. We should avoid undermining his well-being.

In fact, Paul puts the threat of harm in very strong language with the word, "destroy." Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died." That doesn't mean that we might by some questionable practice or some legitimate practice – but one that affects the conscience of the weaker brother – that we might cause that brother or sister to perish eternally. That's not what Paul's saying. We don't have that kind of influence over other people.

We can't affect their eternal destiny. And such an idea is completely inconsistent with the doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints, which Paul has clearly taught in the book of Romans, clearly processed in Romans 8:28-29. Nothing, to sum it up, shall "separate us from the love of God," nothing. This word, "destroy," has a wide range of meaning. It does mean, in some context, to perish in hell, so there's some justification for that interpretation.

But it can also mean to kill, physically, to destroy something or to lose a reward. Here, destroy in this context is the opposite of building up, which in verse 19 Paul says we are to pursue; we're to pursue building one another up in the faith. This is the opposite of that. So what Paul is warning against is misleading a person with a sensitive conscience by a careless or reckless use of our spiritual liberty. Our example, the things that we do, can be harmful.

And so because the consequences are so serious, Paul gives some serious counsel in verse 16. "Do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil." Literally, that means blaspheming. Liberty is good. We should exercise it, but exercise it wisely.

Otherwise our freedom will be thought of by others as an excuse for license, as an excuse for sinning. And we will be slandered in that way. We are responsible for the welfare of others. Am I my brother's keeper? Yes, I am. We are our brother's keeper.

We are responsible for the welfare of others. We're responsible in this particular context for the welfare of the weak. And we are responsible to guard our Christian testimony against slander. The strong, those who are mature, those who truly understand their

freedom and are advanced in the Christian faith, they will be glad to restrict their freedom in order to do that. An understanding of the cross of Christ should motivate us to do that, and an understanding of the kingdom of God should do that as well.

And that's what Paul appeals to in verse 17. "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." The kingdom of God is, very generally speaking, the realm of God's rule. So there's a sense in which we can speak of God's kingdom as the entire universe. Wherever He rules, He's King and it's His domain.

But in this context and in a more narrow sense of that word in the Bible, it is not only the realm of God's rule, but it is the realm to which believers belong. It will become manifest on the earth in the future reign of Christ in the millennial kingdom. But its existence is a present reality in the church, since God rules within us and He is working out His will in His people. We are citizens of His kingdom now. And in the Holy Spirit we presently enjoy the blessings of that kingdom.

The blessings of God's kingdom are not food and drink and material things, but righteousness and peace and joy, meaning justification, reconciliation and the joy that the Holy Spirit gives in the realization of those fruits. Now, some interpret that differently. Some commentators – and there's a fairly even divide among commentators on the meaning of righteousness and peace and joy – some explain that as moral qualities rather than our position in Christ. And so righteousness is right behavior; peace is harmony between men.

But it's more natural to understand righteousness the way Paul has consistently used that word throughout the book as the righteousness of Christ imputed to the believer in justification. Taken in that way, peace is the peace that we have with God. It is the objective peace that Paul wrote about in Romans 5:1, the end of hostility between God and His people. And joy is the joy of salvation,

the rejoicing that occurs because of the hope of glory to come in the kingdom to come. The kingdom of God then consists not of external things but internal things which are eternal things.

Food perishes, but righteousness, our justification, is permanent. It's eternal. And these are the things that we are to concentrate on, not the nonessential things that don't last and don't matter to God. It's finished with diets; it's finished with prescriptions on food and things of that nature. And the weak Christian needs to understand that because a person's life and value in the kingdom isn't measured by what he doesn't eat or doesn't drink, by the things that he denies himself.

And the strong person needs to understand that material things and the enjoyment of food and drink, those things are not all that important. And it shouldn't be allowed to become an instrument of division or harm in the church. Those who let it become that, those who let these nonessentials become that important in their life and in their relationship with others, the person who does that, who puts food or pleasure ahead of the welfare of the weak, doesn't understand the kingdom of God, doesn't understand the nature of his relationship within the will of God. They certainly aren't living according to the values of the kingdom or seeking it.

Now all of this is really a problem of perspective, of getting our priorities straight and learning what is really important in life and what is righteousness, peace and joy are what the kingdom are about. Meaning it is about grace, if we could put it very simply. Everyone in the kingdom, everyone who is a citizen of God's kingdom, all of the saved have been accepted by God and received by Him completely and equally, and all because of the work of Christ. Not because of any work of our own, not because of anything within us. All because of grace, all because of the work of Christ.

And so we are to be accepting of everyone for whom Christ died. We are to be rejoicing in our salvation, not judging and not despising one another, not worrying about nonessential matters, but

making known the important things. Making known among ourselves, within ourselves and to the world at large, God's righteousness and peace. These are the things that should give us joy. These are the things that we should want to learn about, the things we should want to know.

They should be the things that we desire to pursue in our thinking and in doing that, exemplify the kind of things that we should live. And as we pursue the knowledge and the practice of these things, we will gain the right perspective on life; we'll gain Christian perspective. And the nonessentials, the things that we may feel are so important for us to enjoy, those things will become less and less important to us. They were less and less important to the apostle Paul. His life is something of a model for us in this regard.

His life did not consist of material things. As he told the Philippians, he had learned to be content with much; he'd learned to be content with little. Either way, he was happy. He could live under the law or he could live free of the law. He could live like a Jew if he was with a Jew. He could live like a gentile if he was with a gentile.

What he cared about was furthering the work of God and building up the church and expanding it. And so he became all things to all men in order that he might win some to Christ. Well, that's to be our concern; that is to be our focus. Doing that is what Christ encouraged us to do in Matthew 6:33. "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." That is serving Christ.

And that's what Paul advises in verse 18. When we do that, he says, we are "acceptable to God and approved by men." Serving Christ is what pleases God, not being meticulous about diets or days, not insisting on our freedoms and our spiritual rights. And if we serve Christ faithfully, we will not only please God, we will gain the approval of men, which is the opposite of being spoken evil of, the very thing that Paul warned about in verse 16. Now, Paul doesn't

mean that if we serve Christ faithfully that the world's hostility toward the gospel will cease. We know that won't happen.

The Lord made that very clear when, in John 15, He told the disciples if the world hates you, it hates you because it hates me. We won't escape that. But when we live like Christ, when we live as servants, when we live consistent lives, obedient lives as He did, joyful, loving lives as He did, then the world cannot accuse us of hypocrisy. And that, I think, is the idea here. The word, "approved," means tested.

In fact, it was a word that was used of testing metal in the ancient world to determine whether coins were genuine currency or if they were fake. And so by our behavior, we prove ourselves, in the eyes of the world, to be real, to be genuine. We may not win the world over by being Christ-like servants. But the world won't find any evil to speak against us if we do that. We will meet the test of being genuine.

And often we may, in fact, gain the respect of the world and even gain the interest of the world. What's for sure is if we are hypocritical the world will not be drawn to us. We will be a scandal in their eyes. So Paul advises us to pursue these things, to prove ourselves to be real, to prove ourselves to be genuine to meet the test before the world. We do that, though, you'll notice, by seeking to serve Christ, by seeking to please God first and foremost. Not by seeking to please the world.

If we seek to please the world, if we seek to gain the world's approval we won't do that. And as we seek to serve Christ, as we seek to please the Lord God first of all, then all of these other things will take care of themselves. Now, all of this being so, Paul tells us to pursue peace, in verse 19, and to seek to build up one another, take care of one another. The kingdom of God is characterized by peace, and its citizens are to reflect that. But Paul is more direct in verse 20, and again he is speaking to the strong.

"Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense." All of this has been said before. In fact, it seems that Paul is repeating himself. He is, but he's doing that for a purpose.

So we can be sure of this, that when the apostle or any writer of Scripture repeats a point that he's laying great emphasis upon that. And this is a very important issue with the apostle Paul. We are not to be fighting over things that are not important. That is destructive of God's work, and the work of God is the church. That is what He's building in this age.

But its unity is damaged when the strong hurt the weak by insisting on the exercise of their Christian liberties of eating and drinking. And once again, Paul doesn't question the right of the strong to eat whatever they want. "All things indeed are clean," he said. The law's restrictions on food aren't binding on us, and there are no devils in grapes. Everything is clean; nothing is forbidden.

Even so, the understanding and attitude of the weak has to be considered in the way we live our lives. And when the strong person eats carelessly or callously and gives offense, then food becomes evil for that person, for the strong. The right use of Christian liberty involves – as we have said – responsibility and restraint. That's what Paul recommends in verse 21. "It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or do anything by which your brother stumbles."

So for the sake of the strength of the church, for the sake of its unity a person should gladly make a personal sacrifice and refrain from eating or drinking. Well, what does that say, though, about yielding to legalism? Because there is such a thing as the tyranny of the weak. And we can come under that tyranny if we acquiesce to their rules and taboos for the sake of peace. Ray Stedman, who for many years was the pastor of Peninsula Bible Church out in California, had some good comments on that.

And he pointed out, if that happens it's coming under the tyranny of rules and taboos of legalism when the question of Christian

liberty "is settled on the basis of the most narrow and most prejudiced person in the congregation." And, ultimately, that does not serve the cause of Christ, because legalism is innervating. It saps a church of its vitality and its joy and it's as destructive as the other problem. And it ultimately doesn't help the cause of Christ because then the gospel becomes identified with that view, and Christians are then perceived to be narrow-minded people" whose aim is "to prevent the enjoyment of the good gifts."

Well, that's what happens, and it reminds me of a definition that the journalist, H. L. Mencken gave many years ago of Puritanism. He didn't like the Puritans. In fact, he didn't like Christianity. But he gave this kind of witty definition of Puritanism. "It is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy."

Well, that wasn't true. In fact, the Puritans actually enjoyed life and they knew how to live quite well. But that is, for many, the perception of them. And, unfortunately, it's the perception of Christianity. And, unfortunately, it's sometimes justified because there are segments within the church that have become joyless.

And that's what happens when legalism prevails. Paul was very much against that. He taught joy. He commanded joy. Joy's not an option for us. We must rejoice and rejoice always.

He taught freedom in Christ and he taught that we should enjoy our freedom. And he warned the weak against judging the strong for doing what they are free to do. He just taught in our text on the kingdom of God in verse 17, and that it is characterized by internal and eternal fruit, not food and drink. God is not concerned about food; He's not concerned about diets. And the implication for that for the weak is that they're not to make prohibitions on those things a measure of righteousness.

It's not the issue anymore. So he has touched on this problem. He has addressed, at least indirectly, the potential problem of legalism. But Paul doesn't deal with every angle of this issue. That's not his purpose. He is relating his teaching to a given situation, and

here the issue that he is addressing is the abuse of freedom by the strong and the injury it causes the weak.

To prevent that, the strong should avoid eating or drinking or whatever might cause a weaker person to stumble. That doesn't mean that they couldn't eat at other times. It doesn't mean they have to put food away altogether or drinks away altogether. They can enjoy those things. They should enjoy those things. But in a situation where it would cause a weaker brother to stumble, then they shouldn't.

Well, Paul concludes the chapter by calling attention to the roll that conscience plays in guiding our behavior. He speaks first to the strong and then to the weak. In verse 22, he advises the strong Christian not to parade his faith. He says, he is to have it as his "own conviction before God." Now, when Paul speaks of faith here, he's not speaking of saving faith and he's not telling the strong to be quiet about it.

Obviously, that's not his meaning. He's speaking of the faith that enables the strong believer to know, to understand and to enjoy his freedom, not to make a show of it. He doesn't mean he can't explain it or speak about it or teach it to the weak and seek to convince the weak of it. That's not wrong.

That is actually one way that the weak could become strong by learning the truth. But there is a right way to do that, and that is with consideration for the feelings of others. He is not to flaunt his freedom. He's told to hold his freedom, to enjoy it, but always remember that he holds it, he exercises it "before God," as Paul said, which should keep him from turning his liberty into license. All that we do as Christians we do before God.

And, as Paul told the Corinthians in chapter 10 in verse 31, "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." The most mundane things in life: eating, drinking, you have to do them. But do them to God's glory. Remember that we do everything before Him, which legitimizes our freedom here, but gives

us wisdom on how to do it. We do these things before God, and we should not turn our freedom, our liberty into license.

We must be very careful how we live and how we exercise our liberty. Well, then Paul adds a blessing on the person who does that, who lives wisely. He says, "Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves," which means he is blessed. He is happy because he eats or he drinks with a clear conscience.

And he has a clear conscience because he acts from conviction. He knows the liberty that God has given him. He knows that by faith, and he is exercising his liberty from faith. But in verse 23, Paul warns weak Christians that they sin if they act against what they believe. "But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin."

The condemnation occurs not because he has eaten something or drunk something. Food and drink are morally neutral. What condemns him is doing what he does when he has doubts about it. Even though what he does is permissible, even though his convictions are not altogether correct – they're not taught in Scripture – nevertheless, if he is violating his conscience he's not acting from faith, and so it's sin. And he does it because everyone else is doing it.

Maybe he does it because he doesn't want to be in the minority and doesn't want to be different, Maybe he's afraid of being ridiculed for doing what he believes in – a variety of reasons why people might violate their conscience. But whatever the reason is, if he does violate his conscience and does what he believes in his heart of hearts to be wrong, then Paul says he is guilty of sin. One of the commentators on this text put it this way. "A neutral thing only becomes a right thing when it is done out of faith, out of a real reasoned conviction that it is the right thing to do."

The only motive for doing anything is that a man believes it to be right. When a thing is done out of social convention, out of fear of unpopularity to please men, then it is wrong. So conscience serves as

a guide. It's not an infallible guide. In fact, it is a guide that needs to be instructed daily, constantly from the Word of God.

But conscience is given by God. It gives indication to us of what is right or wrong, and we are not to violate it. When we do that, when we go against what our conscience condemns, then we sin. That's the warning that Paul gives to the weak. It's also a message to the strong.

And that's generally what Paul is doing here. He's giving a message to the strong. And the message here, by implication, is that we should force the weak to violate their conscience by eating or drinking or violating the Sabbath before them when they think that that should not be done, they think it's wrong to do those things. We must be conscious of the concerns that they have. Their faith must first be strengthened and enlightened.

Then they can join the strong in the enjoyment of their Christian liberty. And we don't do that by charging ahead, by taking our liberty over them, running them over with their liberty. We do that differently; we do that gently; we do that slowly. We keep pace with them. The Christian life is a walk. It's often described in that way.

And sometimes we have to walk at other people's pace, not our own. And when we are living among the weak, sometimes that walk is a very narrow walk, something like a walk on a tightrope. It's a balancing act. Like the acrobat, we can't lean too far to the right or too far to the left. We can't desert the weaker Christian for the sake of our liberty, and we can't abandon our liberty for the sake of the weak.

We are to hold, as Paul has said, our liberty before God, and do that in a way that doesn't harm the weak. That's a walk that takes great skill, so I compare it to that of a tightrope walker because that takes great skill. I really don't know how they do that. I know it takes great effort. It takes great practice, and I know they make a great many falls in the effort to gain that ability.

But one thing is very clear about how they walk, and that is they walk with concentration. And people who walk on a high wire don't look around. They don't look down at their feet. They don't look at the audience. They do that, they fall. They look forward and they concentrate on the goal, and that is what we do.

To walk well among the weak, we have to look at the goal. And the goal is love. Paul speaks to that in verse 15. He speaks of "walking according to love." And we do that by looking to Christ. That's we learn love.

There's no greater example of that than our Lord Jesus Christ. He is our model, he is our motive, he is our law. He is God Almighty, but He is gentle with the weak. It was said of Him that "a battered reed He did not break, a smoldering wick He did not put out." He is the Lord God, but He became the servant of men.

And that's what we're called to do. We are free and subject to none, as Luther said. But the Christian is also a most beautiful servant of all, subject to all. It's as we consider Christ, as we consider who He is, as we consider what He has done for us by dying in our place, that we consider those things, that we want to please Him and become a blessing to the person for whom He died. Christ had a special concern for the weak.

He invited them to come to Him. "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Are you weak? Are you weighed down with the guilt of sin? Then come to Christ.

He has taken all of that on Himself. He bore our sins on the cross, was punished in our place. And now, all who believe in Him, who put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ are saved forever. They are forgiven of their sins. They are given life eternal all because of Him.

So may God help you to come to Him at His invitation. And you who have come to Him, you are citizens of His kingdom. Live accordingly to the values of that kingdom and seek to be servants to

one another. Now, may God help us to do that. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for your goodness and your grace to us. We thank you for the fact that you sent your Son to die for us and to transfer us from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of your Son. Well, we are citizens of that kingdom and we have an eternal hope. Not because of anything in us; it's because of what you've done.

We are accepted in Christ, fully and freely and completely because of His work of grace. May we live according to that same standard and accept one another by grace and seek to be a help, seek to be servants of all. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.