

Love over Liberty

Romans 14:13-25

October 18, 2020
Steve DeWitt

I have received a lot of positive feedback from last week's sermon in Romans 14. In a world filled with divergent opinions and passions, Romans 14 provides a framework for God's people loving each other in spite of these differences. They sure had them in the church at Rome! We aren't talking about the latest fad-type disagreements. These were historical, ethnic, racial, and religious traditions at sharp odds with each other in one local church.

One faction was the Christians of Jewish descent. They grew up with dietary laws and Sabbath practices tied to generations of Jewish belief. Yes, they were now Christians, but these legacy heart issues are not easily jettisoned. Paul calls them the "weak in faith" in that their conscience was tender to the Jewish rules of their past.

The other faction was Gentile Christians who had no such Old Testament scruples. They ate everything. Drank everything. Did everything. Paul calls them "strong in faith." The weak in faith judged the strong in faith and saw them as sinfully participating. The strong in faith condescended and despised the weak in faith and thought they were spiritually silly.

What's non-essential and what's essential? What do we give our life for and what do we flex for? We will get into this today and this is critical because if we flex with the essentials, we end up with a different gospel and one that doesn't save anyone. So, we mustn't confuse what's essential with what's non-essential as the very gospel itself is at stake.

"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. 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. 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. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Romans 14:13–23 ESV).

Paul makes some foundational points here. First, he urges a stop to all the judging. I think Paul might have liked something I saw some years ago. I was traveling through the south and came by a small church that had signs they would put out by the road to describe what kind of church they are. I found it interesting and took this picture (below):



No Judging. It was either marketing or a reminder to the members what not to do as they came to church. To this, Paul would say, Amen. Especially if it said below, *No judging on Non-essential issues.*

The Strong were Right (and Wrong!)

On the questions at hand, kosher foods and Sabbaths, the strong were technically right! "*I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself*" (Romans 14:14). This "unclean" language harkens back to the Old Testament where unclean meant ceremonially unclean. There were unclean animals that were not to be eaten and a person could become unclean by touching a dead corpse or having leprosy or many other ways. To be unclean was to be unable to join in worship with God's people. There were steps that had to be taken to be clean again.

Paul says he is persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. What does that mean? He is summarizing the teaching of Jesus on this matter. "*And he said to them, 'Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?'*" (Thus, he declared all foods clean.)" (Mark 7:18–19).

Our problem isn't what we put into our mouth but what comes out of our hearts. Jesus' death fulfilled the ceremonial requirements of the law, so the old dietary laws no longer apply. With this, Paul sides with the strong in faith who felt free to eat anything, thought all days were sacred, and presumably enjoyed the wine drinking he mentions in verse 21. A fuller theology of this is found in 1 Timothy 4:4, "*For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.*"

Everything created by God is good if it is enjoyed according to God's will. Fire is great unless you are an arsonist. Religions all try to place limitations on the enjoyment of God's creation, but Christianity embraces a robust doctrine of what God meant when he called all of it "very good"—morally beautiful within his will enjoyed his way and for his glory.

"*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God*" (1 Corinthians 10:31). We have done so many messages on what that means, I won't get into it. My book *Eyes Wide Open* is an explanation of it as well. Forgive the advertisement.

The sort of man-made rules the Pharisees relished are actually counter-productive for living the life that pleases God. They don't stop sin. In many ways, they make sin more desirable.

"If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch' (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh" (Colossians 2:20–23).

Eating kosher doesn't make you more Christlike nor does it produce a life of holiness. We are free in Christ to enjoy his gifts, his way, according to his will.

On the lifestyle issues in the Roman Church, the strong were right. At the same time, they were very, very wrong. How so? *"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"* (Romans 14:15).

There are a cluster of descriptive words here all getting at the same thing regarding the weaker brother: "Grieved" (v. 15), "destroy" (v. 20), "stumbling block or hindrance" (v. 13). Taken as a whole, Paul is describing an approach to these disputable matters in which the strong are injuring the weak. In what way? Some people say it makes them sad. That's hardly destroying. It makes them mad. That's a judgmental issue for them. What is the stumbling block that the strong must avoid?

These words describe a range of effects on the weak that the flaunting of freedom can have. At issue is what we will see next week and that is the matter of conscience. The weak in faith have a weak and condemning conscience in areas in which the strong have freedom.

For the strong to exert peer pressure on the weak to do something they don't have freedom of conscience to do, is not acting in love. It is to cause them to sin against their conscience and thus is a failure to love our brother or sister.

We could add the condescending attitude exhibited in the strong toward the weak as also not helping matters. Did you know you can be right and very wrong if your attitude lacks love? As Paul emphasizes in 1 Corinthians 13, you can be amazing, but if you don't have love, you're nothing. Over the years I have failed in this as I let my frustration out on someone arguing that the Apostle Paul read the King James Bible or that God only likes their kind of music. *People, you are so, so wrong and petty and ignorant* all while I'm showing pride in my rightness.

I have found marriage is helpful in curbing this, by the way. I have learned that I can be technically correct and maritally very, very wrong. Have you noticed how that works in marriage? So, I find myself landing with the wise husbands who are OK being wrong in order to be maritally right. The wise husbands said...Amen.

Romans isn't saying in church community we have to give up our freedom but rather to restrain it for the spiritual good of our brothers and sisters. Don't cause them to violate their conscience and don't create schisms for the sake of your food freedom or Sabbath freedom or wine freedom or any other freedom in a non-essential category. So, what should I do? I'm strong in faith but my extended family isn't. I'm strong, but my fellow small group member isn't.

"It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God" (Romans 14:21-22).

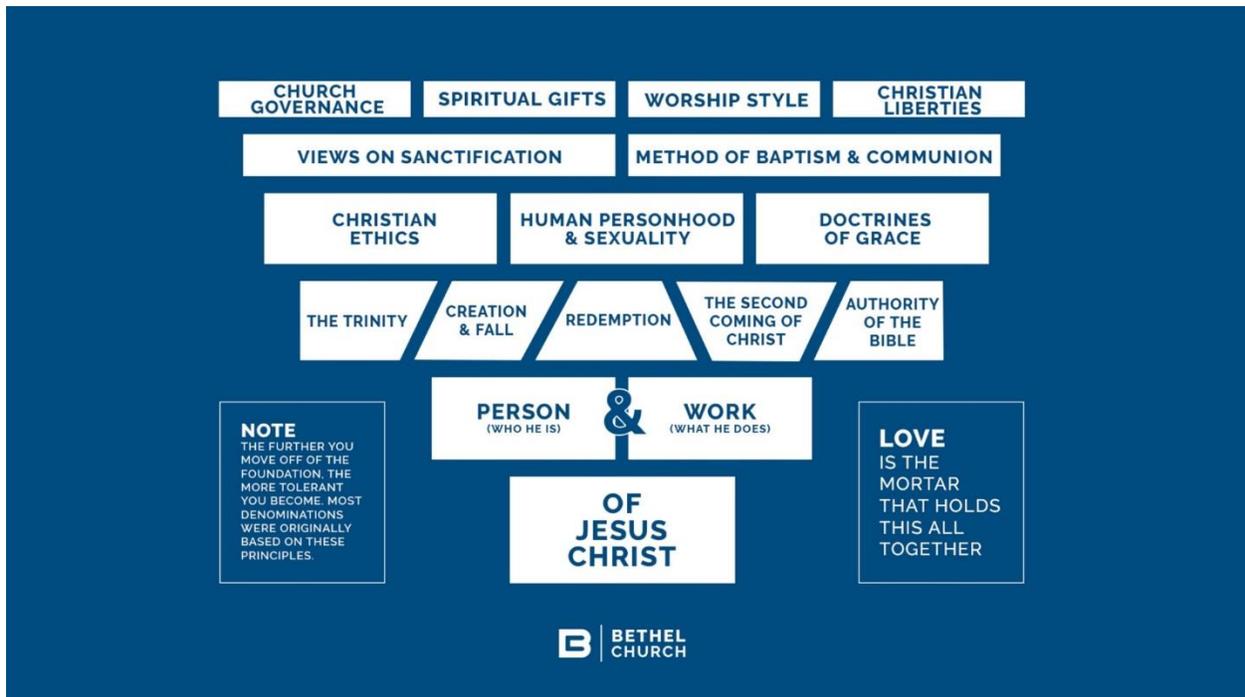
Rather than insisting on exercising it, if necessary, enjoy it when it's just you and God. Make that a private enjoyment rather than flaunting it at the church potluck.

Keep the Main Things the Main Things

You may say, *why should I even care about all this?* The key verse here is verse 17, *"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit"* (Romans 14:17).

Paul says to the strong, your priorities are all messed up if you make this about eating and drinking. The kingdom of God is about so much more than kosher foods and sabbaths. When Christians go to war over Christian liberty issues, it trivializes the really important stuff, which he lists here as *"righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."* How much damage has been done in churches when we make things of really minor importance occasions for major arguments? Have you been in church meetings like this? Yelling. Neck veins popping. Over what? The virgin birth? The nature of Christ? No. It's who chairs the committee or who picks the color of the carpet.

This leads to the question, *what things should we go to the wall over and what things do we, for the sake of peace, not get too worked up over?* Many years ago, my mentor in ministry Kimber Kauffman, developed what he called the concept of the inverted pyramid. *Note that it is not exhaustive.*



Everything rests on the person and work of Jesus. The first two lines are the ones we take a bullet for. Many Christians in history have. These are essential. In terms of Romans 14, anyone who God welcomes must believe in these.

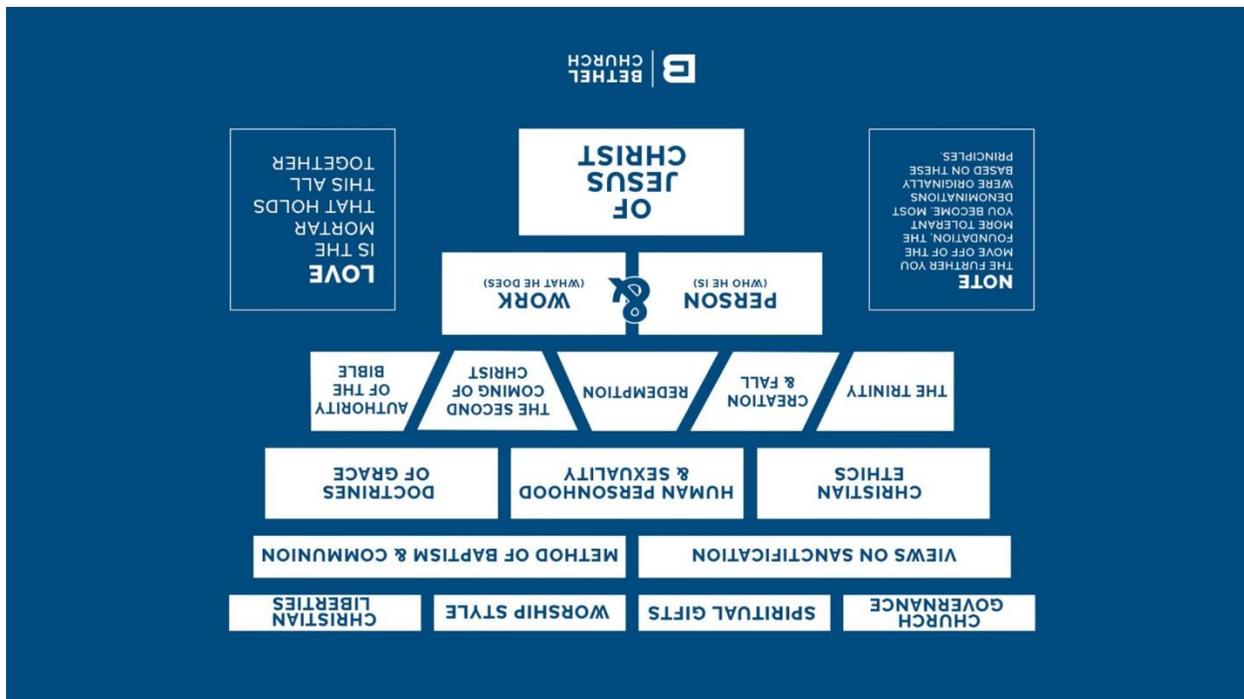
Next are really important tiers of doctrine that urge our best contemplations, but that people can disagree on and still be welcomed by God into heaven.

As you move up the levels, these are representative of a class of issues that books are written on and perhaps denominations founded on but that are still within orthodoxy. Finally, you have a level of mostly personal preference type stuff that within the same church, small group, and even marriage there are differing opinions but hey, we can easily get along.

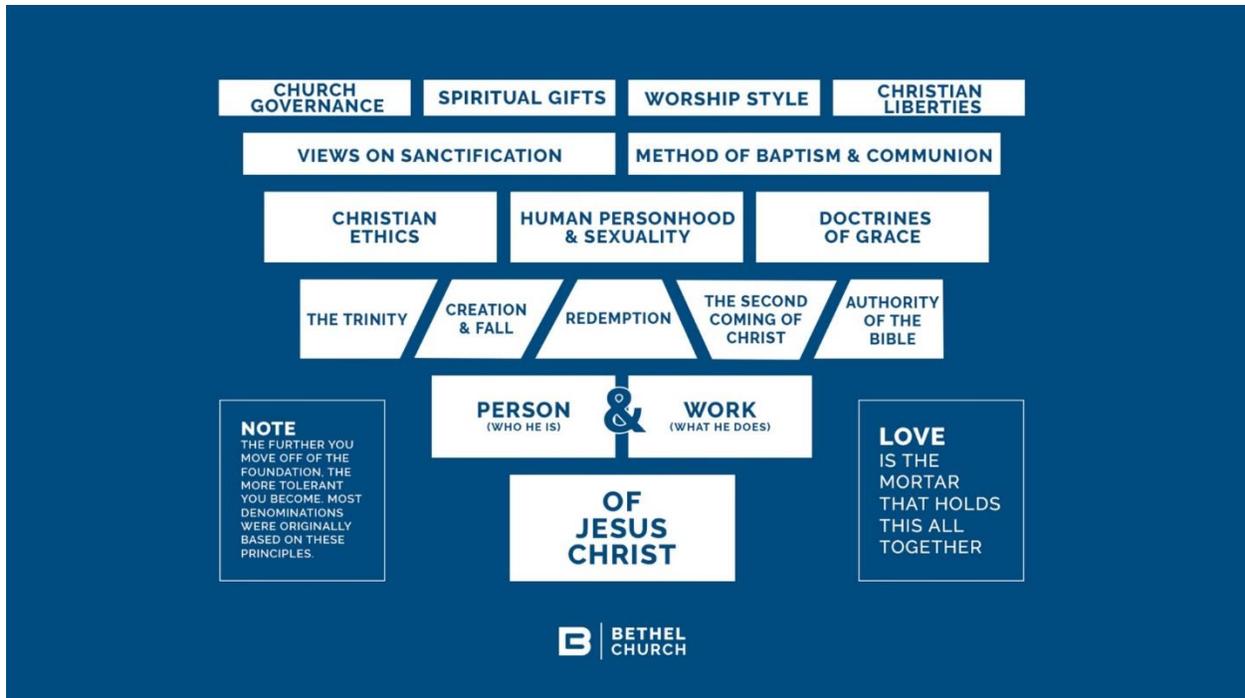
We call it weighted theology. Not everything is equally important. On the top level, we are called to *gospel flexibility*. *Glory of God flexibility*. *Best for my brother flexibility*. When I'm flexible on the unimportant, I'm showing respect for what is really important.

This is imperative lest Romans 14 tap into the spirit of the age in which pluralism says, *everything is opinion. No truth is absolute. Everything is subjective. All religions are basically the same. Any church that calls itself Christian must be fine*. No. Not on this level. Deny any of these and the Bible calls it heresy. But let's not call a different faithful translation of the Bible heresy. Let's not have vein popping arguments over hot dogs at the potluck.

What too often happens is this:



The things that don't matter are what we divide over and the things that matter eternally are assumed or trivialized into obscurity. This was the danger for the church at Rome and is the danger for every church. We think of our contemporary context where matters related to COVID or interpretations of viral statistics are sufficient for some Christians in America to go nuclear.



Put a virus and PPE on this chart. Where does it fit? Masks vs. resurrection? Same level? I doubt they're anywhere on this chart at all. But this is how things take on a life of their own and people get swept up and minor things become major things. The next time there's a blowup in the church about something, ask yourself, *where does this fit in the inverted pyramid?* Love is the mortar that keeps all these things together and us together in them as well.

I've heard this story told a few times:

"Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?" He said, "Yes."

I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too!

Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him off [the bridge]."¹

¹ Emo Philips, "The Best God Joke Ever—and It's Mine!" The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/sep/29/comedy.religion>, September 29, 2005.

A favorite commentator made a helpful point here. The more we are amazed and rejoicing in the main things, the less likely a minor thing will be elevated to a main thing. They say, don't go grocery shopping when you are hungry. You'll pay full price for anything and everything. It all seems important. But when you are satisfied, then the Ho-Ho's and ice cream bars aren't as enticing.

Why must our church remain nourished and satisfied in the gospel essentials? One important reason is that when the gospel truths are the big deal, nothing else threatens to become the big deal. Nobody but Jesus is the big deal. When a church focuses on other things, it's because they are grocery shopping hungry. They think the kingdom of God is eating and drinking stuff. That's the trivial stuff.

What would God say to the Christian today who hasn't read their Bible much, hasn't thought about God much, hasn't served God much, yet their hours dedicated to the presidential election are hard to count? The thoughts about culture wars fill the mind. The worries and fears all relate to what's happening in the world around us. What might God say to a Christian like that?

The kingdom of God is not worried about who is president, who is on the Supreme Court, electoral college ballots or the all-important county coroner election. Don't trivialize your soul by being consumed with the things of a world that's passing away.

The kingdom of God is the redemptive reign of God through Christ. The kingdom of God is where it's at for us. Don't trivialize your life and your soul with worrying about lesser things. Be a faithful citizen in the kingdom of man for sure, but don't turn the pyramid upside down. Your soul was made for so much more than these minor things. Don't settle.

But my conscience says _____. How do we deal with our conscience? Can we change it? Should we? That's next week! I hope you'll join us. I want to keep this wonderful summary of what I'm saying before us as we end, what is Paul saying? *In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.*

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Permanent Text Edition® (2016).* Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

© 2020 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address (www.bethelweb.org) on the copied resource.