

## **Romans: On Christian Freedom**

**Romans 14:13-23**

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*November 25, 2012*

Now let me go ahead and tell you something. Tonight's message is really a one-point message. Now there will be four steps in that one-point message but it's really a one-point message! And I can sum up that one-point message in the final line of the little song that we're going to sing at the end of the service. "Christ-bought freedom. Grace-wrought holiness." And here's the one-point message: Our Christ-bought freedom as Christians does not contradict grace-wrought holiness in the Christian life. Christ-bought freedom is not a contradiction of grace-wrought holiness. Those things go together. They are two great tastes that go together. Those things are not in competition with one another, in tension with one another. Those things go together in the Christian life. That's one of the major themes of Romans 14.

Now let me ask you to take your bulletin again before we open our Bibles and turn to the back of the bulletin, I think it's the back panel, right there, and there you will see a twelve-point outline of this passage in Romans 14 verses 13 to 23. That is simply there for your benefit. I tried to go through that passage and make sense out of the flow of Paul's arguments and turn it into twelve specific propositions that he was making about the unique freedoms that we have as Christians. And it's just there for your edification. I'm not going to preach a twelve-point sermon; it's simply there to guide you through the passage because we're not going to work phrase by phrase through the passage. I want to hit the high points and I want to draw attention to this one great theme.

Now if you have your Bibles, turn with me to Romans chapter 14. We're going to be looking at verses 13 to 23, and as we do so, let me tell you why. I mentioned to you last Lord's Day Evening that we're looking at the passage in Romans 13:1-7 last Lord's Day Evening, the passage this morning, Romans 15:22-29, and Romans 14:13-23, in part because as we were going back through and tagging sermons for the new website we noticed that we did not have transcriptions for those passages in the exposition that we did through the entire book of Romans about ten years ago. And so it was suggested to me that I preach another sermon on those passages so that they could be tagged and transcribed and put into that series and we'd have a complete series on the book of Romans.

But as I saw the passage that were missing I realized actually that each of those speak to important issues in the life of the church today that would be helpful to address. And so last Lord's Day Evening we looked at Romans 13 which is very timely for us as we try and figure out, as Christians, how we live in a culture that is increasingly antagonistic to the things that we believe the Bible teaches about the way people ought to live and what is important in life and it's important for us as believers to know what our responsibilities are to a government and in a culture that is not friendly to the things that we believe are true and right and good. And so we spent some time doing that last Lord's Day Evening. Then this morning we looked at a passage in which Paul articulates something very close to the heart of his theology of ministry and we especially looked at some aspirations of the Christian life that grow out of Paul's words to the Roman church in Romans 15 verses 22 to 29.

Tonight I want to look at the issue of Christian freedom. And here's what I want you to have in mind before we even read the passage. Sanctification and Christian freedom are closely linked ideas. Christian freedom and sanctification are things that go together. Understanding our freedoms as Christians is very important for sanctification. Pursuing sanctification is very important for Christian freedom. And again, just like the last phrase in the song that we're going to sing at the end of the service, those things go together. They're not in competition or contradiction, but Christian freedom and sanctification go together. Now that's important because we live in a day and age where there is renewed attention being given to the doctrine of sanctification. And I'm talking about in our circles, the sort of evangelical, Presbyterian, and reformed world is doing a lot of thinking about sanctification.

And there's some interesting proposals that are being made in our day and time as to how one ought to pursue or not pursue sanctification. One thing that I find - and I'm not at that age where I can start talking about "the younger generation" — one thing that I find in my younger brothers and sisters in Christ now is there is an increased desire for us to be transparent about struggles in the Christian life. And so, whereas, in my generation or older, you might die before you let someone know what your besetting sins were. My younger brothers and sisters in Christ are very likely to walk into my office, sit down, and say, "I have an addiction to pornography" or "I'm cheating on my husband" or "I have a substance abuse problem." Whereas, my parents, who didn't have those things, but if they had wouldn't have told you if they did! And that has led to some interesting challenges in how we pursue sanctification. Is transparency and authenticity so important that there is no expectation of progress or change? Or is there such an expectation of progress or change that a person doesn't want to let you know what they're actually struggling with? And that becomes a significant issue in our day and age. And I think Paul, in Romans 14, has some things that actually help us there. And that's why I was so happy to see this passage pop up and so happy to address it with you tonight.

Before we read God's Word let's pray and ask for His help and blessing.

*Father, we come before You tonight and ask for Your help. We want to be more like our Savior. We want, when we sing, "May the mind of Christ my Savior live in me from day to day," we mean that Lord, and yet many of us are painfully aware of how far we fall short of that ideal. How do we handle that, Lord? How do we pursue holiness and honesty at the same time? How do we deal with besetting sins without becoming either flippant in the way we approach them or so deeply discouraged by backsliding and struggles and falls that we can't go on in the Christian life? Help us. Bless us as we read God's Word. Grant that we would receive it as the very Word of God, not simply as the opinions of men, but as Paul the inspired apostle speaking Your Word to us for Your glory and our good. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.*

This is the Word of God. Hear it in Romans 14 verses 13 to 23:

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.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

There is an approach to sanctification, and you can read it in books that are read, again, in our theological neck of the woods in the evangelical world, you can hear it in sermons and talks and conferences, there is an approach to sanctification that is essentially saying this — there are many real Christians that are burdened with a fear that God is going to reject them because of their besetting sins. And

what they need to understand is that the doctrine of justification sets us free from a fear of being condemned when we stumble along the way and we need to understand that for the believer, God did not send His Son to die for us so that we would become more and more holy, less and less sinful. He sent His Son to die for us so that we would be free, free from having to worry about His condemnation, free from having to worry about Him rejecting us, free from even having to worry about becoming more holy. And once you understand that fundamental principle then your life will change.

Now if you follow that line of argument, the line of argument is essentially this — let me give you the good side of it. The good side of it is that there are many Christians out there that don't understand the doctrine of justification. And my guess is, everybody in this room who's involved in Christian ministry in an evangelical context has encountered exactly that — good Christians who have not realized the full ramifications, the freeing ramifications, of the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone in their lives. That's absolutely true; we meet it all the time — sincere believers in our Lord Jesus Christ who, because of struggles with besetting sins, fear the condemnation of God, when in fact what they are dealing with are the normal struggles of a vibrant Christian life. The life of the Spirit in us does not end warfare with sin, it begins it, and the fact that you're having to battle sin isn't proof that you're dead, it's proof that you're alive! And so the good side of this material that you get in books and conferences and articles and sermons is that we need to understand the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone better and that that will help our assurance. That's absolutely true.

The bad side of that argument is that it seems to suggest that holiness is in competition and even contradiction of freedom, the kind of freedoms that God gives us in Jesus Christ. And that's of course a significant mistake. It's clearly a mistake in light of what we've just read here in Romans chapter 14. The pursuit of holiness is not a contradiction of the freedom that Christ brings, and yet there are many people that almost present it that way, that to pursue holiness is to deny the objective basis of our relationship with God in Jesus Christ, that we have a relationship with God that is based on what Jesus has done outside of us, it's not based on what God is doing in us, and therefore to pursue holiness and to hope to become better is actually a contradiction of the glorious truth of justification by faith.

Now I want to come right out and say that teaching fundamentally misunderstands Christian freedom. Christian freedom is not freedom to not care about sin anymore. Christian freedom is not freedom to not care about becoming more Christ-like. It's the very opposite of that. In the Christian life, to go back to the little song at the bottom of your bulletin, Christian freedom, Christ-bought freedom, is the perfect complement of grace-wrought holiness. Those two things go together.

And I want to present an argument for that from Romans 14 very briefly tonight. The arguments for the view that I've been describing essentially go like this. If Christians understand the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, that we are not condemned by our sin but He has paid the penalty of that sin and therefore there is now no condemnation for us, if they really understand that Gospel, they will understand that they are now free to do whatever they want to do, even if it's sin, because if you can't do what you want to do, even sin, then you're really not free. Now I've actually read those words in a book by a Presbyterian evangelical pastor. If you're not free to sin, then you're not really free. The apostle Paul would vigorously object to that particular line and let me explain why. It starts with understanding the freedom of God. Now I said it's a one-point sermon but this is the first of my four steps on the way to that one-point sermon, okay?

## **CHRISTIAN FREEDOM IS GROUNDED IN THE FREEDOM OF GOD**

The first step is to understand the freedom of God. Our Christian freedom is grounded in the freedom of God. Think with me for just a moment about the freedom of God. God is totally free. There is a sense in which He is the only Being in the universe who is totally free. He does what He pleases. And think of how the Word of God emphasizes this over and over. "I know that the Lord is great. Our God is above all gods. He does whatever he pleases in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all the depths." That's Psalm 135 verses 5 and 6. "What His soul desires, He does" — Job 23:13. "God works all things after the council of His own will" — Ephesians 1:11. "He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants on the earth" — Daniel 4:35. "His purpose is established and He accomplishes His good pleasure" — Isaiah 46:10. "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" — Psalm 115:3. Notice over and over the emphasis that God does what He pleases. By the way, that phrase finds its way into *The Westminster Confession of Faith* and over and over and over again if you read *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, which is only about twelve to fourteen pages, single-spaced, if you take out all the Scripture references, it's a pretty short document. But over and over, I've never counted up the number of times but it's at least twenty or twenty-five times that document says, "It pleased the Lord. It pleased the Lord. It pleased the Lord." In other words, the Lord decided to do such-and-such because it pleased Him. He wanted to do it.

Now let me ask you this. Does the fact that the Lord does whatever He pleases mean that God is free to sin? No. For instance, Paul tells us in Titus chapter 1 verse 2 that God cannot lie. Does it make God less free that He cannot lie? No! It makes Him more free that He cannot lie! The very famous 20th century theologian Karl Barth suggested that for God to be free He had to be able to become His opposite, but that's not Biblical logic. God can't choose to not exist. God can't choose to do evil. Those are not limitations, those are perfections! The freedom of God consists not in His ability to choose the opposite of good, the

freedom of God consists in His ability to choose in accordance with His character. We believe that God is good and God is sovereign, and He is more free when His sovereignty is exercised in consistently with His character. Now once we understand that, we will understand that true Christian freedom is not indifferent to sin. True Christian freedom mirrors the kind of freedom God has. We are most like God not when we sin but when we want to not to. We will be perfectly like God in that way in glory one day. Right now, it's a rocky road, but you are not less free when you choose not to sin; you are more free now when you choose not to sin. And the freedom that you're experiencing is the freedom of choosing to be what God has made you and redeemed you to be. So Christian freedom is when your desires line up with a renewed heart.

Think of how the Old Testament emphasized that when the new covenant came, what was God going to do? He was going to give you a new heart or a new spirit. Or the way Jeremiah would put it, "He's going to write the law on your heart." What's the point there? So that you want to do what you ought to do. Many Christians today are trying to assure struggling Christians by saying, "You don't need to worry about 'ought' anymore. You don't need to worry about commands anymore. You don't need to worry about directives anymore. You don't need to worry about musts and shoulds and oughts." Whereas Paul says, "No, no, no. Christian freedom is when the want to and the ought to line up, when you want to do what you ought to do." That's how God's freedom works. He always wants to do what is consistent with His nature and He is good. And Christian freedom mirrors that.

## **CHRISTIAN FREEDOM IS NOT FREEDOM TO SIN**

The second thing that we need to know — Christian freedom is not freedom to sin. Over and over that is emphasized in this passage. Isn't it interesting that Paul, in a passage where he's emphasizing Christian freedom, constantly does it in reference to other believers in Christ? Now he says, "If you use your freedom and it causes a brother or sister to stumble, you're not using your freedom right." And so that means that it's not an unconstrained freedom that Paul is talking about, to just do whatever you feel like, whether it's right or wrong, you're always having to think about the significance and the impact on brothers and sisters in Christ.

Well *The Westminster Confession of Faith* speaks on that as well. If you'd turn in your hymnals, if you'd look at the back of your hymnals, turn to page 859 and you will see a description of Christian freedom there:

"The liberty which Christ has purchased for believers" — bottom of page 859, so it's talking about Christian freedom - "under the gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and

dominion of sin, from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation;” — so that's a pretty big list of things that consists in our Christian freedom that goes on to — “as also in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience to him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love, and a willing mind. All which were common also to believers under the law; but under the New Testament the liberty of Christians is further enlarged in their (1) freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish Church was subjected; (2) and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and (3) in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.”

So the confession outlines for us three ways in which the freedom of believers in the new covenant is greater than the believer's experience of freedom under the old covenant. But here's what I want you to see. Look at section two, or section three, sorry — chapter twenty section three on page 860:

“They who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, do practice any sin, or cherish any lust, do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty; which is, that, being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.”

My one point there is simply this. Christian freedom is not freedom to sin. Christian freedom is not freedom to sin.

## **CHRISTIANS UNDER THE NEW COVENANT HAVE GREATER FREEDOM THAN BELIEVERS DID UNDER THE OLD COVENANT**

Third point, Christians under the new covenant - that's you and me — do have greater freedom than believers did under the old covenant. You've heard the confession spell that out. How does Paul spell that out in Romans 14? Well, he spells it out when he says, “There is no longer any unclean food.” Look at Romans 14:14. “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.” Well my friends, you don't have to look very far in the Old Testament to know that there were things that were unclean. And the apostle Paul is saying to these believers in Romans 14, “There is nothing unclean anymore. That's done. The old ceremonial ordinances are gone. They are no longer binding on you as believers. The unclean/clean food law distinction is gone. It was eradicated by Jesus.” So there is a greater freedom from the ceremonial law and *The Confession of Faith* speaks to that.

But ultimately, Paul makes it clear that Christian freedom is the freedom of righteousness and peace and joy. Look at what he says in 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.” In other words, Paul is saying, “Even better than

the fact that we can eat shrimp and lobster, and that is a great freedom that believers ought to celebrate regularly, I hope you do, because those kinds of shellfish were outlawed under the unclean regulations of the Old Testament ceremonial code. Even better than the fact that we can eat all of those things that were once outlawed under the old covenant is the fact of the reign of the freedom of God in the believer's heart in righteousness, peace, and joy. And notice how freedom and righteousness are not in contradiction. Righteousness is one of the new liberties and blessings of the new covenant. It's not a contradiction of the freedom or the liberty of the Christian.

So what does the freedom of the Christian consist in? The freedom of the Christian consists in the Spirit's work in us so that we yearn to do what God wants us to do and so that we yearn to be what God has made us to be and what He has re-made us to be in Christ Jesus, not in throwing off the commands of God, not in saying "It doesn't matter whether I sin anymore," but in fact in pursuing righteousness in confidence, knowing that we are not going to be perfectly righteous until after we take our last breath. Perfect righteousness is never going to happen here. We are going to have to ask forgiveness every day. We are going to have to repent every day until we take our last breath and we go to glory. But there is a joy that is experienced in the freedom of righteousness that cannot be experienced when you are indifferent to righteousness. You see, initially it seems freeing to many people to be told, "It doesn't matter if you sin. It doesn't matter if you don't get better, because the freedom that God wants to give you is the freedom from worry about the fact that you're not getting any better." That sounds good at first to some discouraged Christian, except that God didn't make us to be satisfied with that because He made us to be like Him. And that is not how He exercises His freedom. So to the extent that we are satisfied with that formula we will actually be robbed of the joy that comes from growing, yes in little incremental itty bitty steps sometimes, yes with pitfalls and backslides and struggles and ups and downs along the way, but nevertheless growing just a little bit to want to do the things that God wants to do and to want to be the way that God made us to be. And this is the kind of freedom that Paul is talking about in Romans 14. It is not an indifference to holiness; it's an embrace of holiness.

Now this is only an hors d'oeuvre. I hope that you will go yourselves and study more the doctrine of Christian freedom. You could study Romans 14 and pull out some commentaries. John Murray's commentary on Romans 14 would provide you a rich feast on which you could meditate for many, many weeks with great profit. Or, you could get out a book like, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, which you'll find in the Banner of Truth paperback series and meditate on the freedom that we have in Christ.

Let's pray.

*Heavenly Father, we want to be free, not free to sin but free to be who You made us to be, free to want what You want us to want, free to do what You want us to*

*do. We want to want to choose that. We know that sometimes the wanting to do it is the hardest part. So by Your Spirit, work that wanting to do what we ought to do in our hearts so that it is not burdensome, so that it doesn't come from a craven fear, a cringing fear, but from childlike faith and filial love and reverent awe of the God who loved us and gave His Son for us. We ask these things in Jesus' name, amen.*

Would you stand for God's blessing? And go ahead and take your bulletin out and we'll be ready to sing, "Father By Your Spirit Grant Us" to the tune of "May the Mind of Christ My Savior."

Receive now the Lord's benediction. Peace be to the brethren and love with faith, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ until the daybreak and the shadows flee away. Amen.

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