

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Disagreeing Without Dividing

Loving Others...

Study #2

More Than We Love Our Freedoms

(Romans 14:13-23)

Introduction: Limiters we love...

My lawn mower's engine has one job. Its job is to spin the blades that cut the grass. I pull the cord. The engine starts. The blades turn. Simple.

On this mower, I can't make any adjustments to the engine. It was set at the factory for a certain RPM and is controlled by a gizmo called a *governor*.

A governor is a device that keeps people who might want to mow faster from revving up the engine.

Now, if I could increased the engine speed, could I mow faster? Yep. And if I increased the engine speed, would I get less mowings per gallon and possibly shorten the lifespan of the engine? Yep, again.

Gas-powered lawn mowers are everywhere, so we take them for granted. But they are marvels of complexity, made up of lots of parts that move at very high speeds. If the engine speed is too high, lots of bad things can happen to those parts.

The governor preserves the mower's engine by limiting the operator's freedom to go as fast as he/she might want to go.¹ So, while it is a limiter on freedom, a governor performs a valuable service.

Today we discover that a governor is a pretty handy device to keep around when it comes to how we relate to each other in the church, too.

In fact, when you put a governor on freedoms you could legitimately exercise, you may protect the unity of Jesus' church AND protect vulnerable brothers and sisters for whom Christ died.

We're turning to Paul's letter to the Romans for a second week to listen as he continues on the same theme he started last Sunday.

His topic was crucial for Jesus followers in the first century and it's just as crucial for us today. We are thinking together, with Paul's guidance, about how we can disagree with each other without dividing from each other.

Now, we're going to disagree. It's inevitable. Of course, there are some issues about which we won't disagree.

There is a core of Christian beliefs that we will all agree with: God exists eternally as a trinity; Jesus is the God/man; we are all in need of salvation; God gives eternal life to all who believe in Jesus.

And, as today is Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, on this day we will all affirm that the human life inside a mother's womb is precious and should be protected.

So, we pray for that protection.

We love and support Crisis Pregnancy Centers. We offer support to women in challenging pregnancies. And we offer God's grace and love to any women who suffer today from a past abortion.

¹ Governors are used on all kinds of engines. U-Haul places governors on their trucks to keep renters of their vehicles from going dangerously fast on the freeway.

Further, tomorrow is Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, when we will remember the civil rights gains made in our country under his leadership.

Dr. King reminds us that all people of every race and ethnicity are deserving of dignity, because all people are created in God's image and likeness.

We agree on these and on other central things. But we'll NOT all agree about how involved we should be on public policy issues. We'll not all agree on matters of politics, certain, secondary beliefs, and even some standards of behavior.

Paul has some helpful and blunt counsel for us as we disagree with each other.

Enough with the Negative and Destructive! (v. 13)

Christians, Don't Judge One Another ANYMORE (v. 13a)

[13a] Therefore let's not judge one another anymore

Last Sunday, Paul introduced the categories of "weak" and "strong" Christians.

***The weak Christian is the one who is limited by his conscience in the exercise of freedoms he is actually free to enjoy.

***The strong Christian understands that he is free to do whatever Scripture doesn't explicitly prohibit.

Yes, it is possible that the weak and the strong may both be guilty of judging the other for not agreeing on this or that issue.

But Paul directs his comments here to the strong, because it is the strong who are more likely to judge the weak for their hesitancy and tentativeness.

In the first century, such judging concerned whether or not Christians should eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

Today, the issues that provoke judging may involve movies, media, schooling options, alcohol, gaming, politics, worship styles, or any one of a dozen other matters about which the Bible does not give us a ***"Thus saith the Lord."***

And as is obvious from the way Paul says what he says here - ***"let's not judge one another anymore..."*** - the Christians at Rome were currently judging each other for having differing convictions.

They were to stop it, right now, just as we are to stop it right now, too. No more judging!

But then, Paul moves from the topic of judging to introduce us to another category, one that Jesus spoke about.² (This might get uncomfortable...)

Christians, Don't Cause Each Other to Stumble (v. 13b)

[13] Therefore let's not judge one another anymore, but rather determine³ this: not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's or sister's way.

In Matthew 18, Jesus warned that anyone who put a ***"stumbling block"*** in front of a child who believed in Him was in big trouble.

The Lord said that it would be better for that person to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck and be tossed into the sea.

Clearly, you and I want to take care to NOT cause someone to stumble.⁴

² See Matthew 13:41; 16:23; Luke 17:1-2.

³ The words "judge" and "determine" are the same Greek word (*κρίνω*).

⁴ In some places in Scripture, where we find this concept of the ***"stumbling-block,"*** there is the idea of enticement or entrapment, even seduction. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word translates a Hebrew verb meaning *"to lay a trap."*

What both Jesus and Paul (here in Romans) were warning against when they spoke of being a “stumbling-block” was the possibility that someone (the strong) would lead someone else (the weak) into sin.

Apparently, in addition to judging, that was also happening among Christians in Rome.

Some of the Christians there (the strong) knew that it was perfectly all right to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, because idols are nothing. There is only one God. So, they went ahead and ate.

Other Christians (the weak), perhaps sensitized to the issue because of past experiences with idolatry, just couldn’t bring themselves to eat that meat.⁵

The weak’s restriction was unnecessary (there is, really, only one God), but they didn’t have the freedom of conscience to eat what they used to eat - meat sacrificed to idols - before they came to faith in Christ.

It’s easy to see how this difference of perspective came about.

AND there need have been no problem with this diversity of conviction. Christians should be able to disagree and still get along just fine and live with differing positions in “the grey zone.”

But a problem does sometimes arise because the exercise of liberty on the part of the strong can lead to problems for the weak.

Before delving into that idea, though, Paul made clear that the strong’s ideas about eating meat were not wrong.

Intro to the Next section: Clean and Unclean (v. 14)

Nothing is unclean in and of itself... (v. 14a)

⁵ Or, to use another example, some Jewish converts couldn’t bring themselves to break with the Old Testament dietary restrictions, and couldn’t stop observing kosher, even after conversion to Christ.

[14a] I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself⁶

That’s forceful. He’s confident that there are no foods that God would call “unclean.”

So, how did he become so convinced? Jesus convinced him.

When we turn back to the Gospels, we hear Jesus speaking about clean and unclean food.

He said, ***[Mark 7:14]...“Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: [15] there is nothing outside the person which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which come out of the person are what defile the person.”***

Jesus wasn’t talking about the digestive system. In a break with dramatic historic Jewish thought, His main application is that taking in food of any kind doesn’t make a person unclean before God.

What makes us dirty are the words that leave our mouths and the actions we take. That was radical. And Mark clearly *got* Jesus’ meaning, adding, ***[19] Thereby He declared all foods clean.***⁷

The strong have a perfectly legitimate right in Jesus to enjoy their food - even food that had been sacrificed to pagan idols. Even bacon.

Then, Paul speaks about the weak, those whose consciences didn’t let them do what might be considered “questionable things.”

⁶ The ancient Roman Stoics used to teach that there are a great many things in life that were neither good nor bad, they were “indifferent.” (Greek, *adiaphora*)

⁷ We find the same thought at 1 Timothy 4:4 where Paul says, ***“For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude.”*** The historical moment at which the church actually “got it” is recorded in Acts, chapter 10, when God gave Peter a vision of clean and unclean animals being lowered down from heaven on a sheet, while a voice commanded, ***“Arise Peter, kill and eat.”***

What he says may surprise you.

...but things you THINK are unclean ARE unclean to you (v. 14b)

[14b]...but to the one who thinks something is unclean, to that person, it is unclean.⁸

Let's trace this thought carefully. Jesus actually said that no food is unclean. But it does not follow that everyone is therefore free to eat everything.

Remember that the ones we are calling "weak" couldn't accept the idea that all foods were clean.

They thought that to eat the foods prohibited by the Mosaic Law or to eat food that had been sacrificed to pagan idols would be sinful.

And if these folks ate what they thought was unclean, their eating would actually BE sinful, because it is sinful when we do what we think is wrong. It is sinful for us to violate our conscience.

Now, we might wonder why someone would violate or seek to silence his conscience? There could be all kinds of reasons.

Maybe because he or she:

- sees "everyone else doing it."
- does not want to stand in a minority of one.
- does not want to be different or unpopular.

But here's the thing. If you or I or anybody else - in our heart of hearts - believes a thing to be wrong, if we can't rid ourselves of the

⁸ Paul doesn't affirm the converse. He doesn't say that whatever is of faith is not sin. The truth is that we might believe that what we are doing is right and true and what God wants us to do - but isn't. Example: Paul thought that the right thing to do before God was to stone Stephen to death.

feeling that it is forbidden, and then go ahead and do it anyway, we have sinned.⁹

Paul IS NOT saying that whether an action is sinful or not simply depends on how we view it. No - there are some things that are, objectively, sinful acts.

He IS saying that some Christians are more free than others to enjoy certain activities without sinning.¹⁰

Now, here's where it gets tricky.

When the strong Christian uses his freedom, we don't condemn/judge him for doing so. But the strong should take care lest his freedom doesn't jeopardize the spiritual health of the weak.

And that thought, jeopardizing the spiritual vitality of our brothers and sisters in Christ - being stumbling-blocks - is exactly where Paul is headed.

We are all free in Jesus. Free from the penalty of sin, free from the controlling power of sin, free to enjoy liberty.

And in what follows, Paul uncovers three more wonderful freedoms Jesus brings. First, we are free to love.

⁹ The old adage, "*When in doubt, don't!*" appears to me to be true, not because by not participating in something we can be sure that we don't cross moral boundaries (a Pharisaic strategy), but because our doubting indicates that the act we are contemplating is not of faith. Paul says, whatever is not of faith is sin. (v. 23)
¹⁰ In the early church, Christians recognized the need for some give and take between those whose consciences allowed certain things, and those whose consciences didn't. Because of tensions that existed between Gentile and Jewish Christians, they convened a council in Jerusalem, the Minutes of which are recorded in Acts 15. The Jewish Christians who came together recognized that the Gentiles were full-fledged members of the church, but also determined that the Gentiles should abstain from food considered abhorrent by the Jews (blood, things sacrificed to idols), and conform to the Jewish marriage-laws against fornication, to keep from offending their Jewish brothers. The thought was that if Gentile Christians who lived alongside of Jewish Christians lovingly limited their freedoms, the church could maintain unity and its powerful witness.

Embrace the Positive and the Helpful! (vv. 14-19)

Freedom - to LOVE (vv. 15-16)

Hurting someone by the exercise of my liberty (v. 15a)

[15a] For if because of food your brother or sister is hurt, you are no longer walking in accordance with love.

So... (and, yes, I'm sure I could have come up with a better "for instance" than this. Maybe I should have used something having to do with movies or art or drink.)

You pull into the gas station to fill up your car. Thirty-five dollars later, you hang up the pump and walk inside to buy a snack.

Now, it just so happens that before you came to Christ you had an unhealthy relationship with gambling. In fact, your online gambling habit put you deep into debt and caused problems for people you love.

In the year and a half since you've been following Jesus, you've put all of that behind you.

You know that the Bible doesn't come right out and say "*Thou shalt not gamble.*" But, because of past problems, you just haven't felt good about it. You don't gamble at all. You don't even play the lottery.

While you're standing in line to buy your \$2 bag of Cheetos, you notice the guy in front of you from church.

You recognize him as a solid, mature believer. Sunday School teacher. Care Group leader. Elder. You respect him.

Then you hear him say to the cashier, "*I'll take three 'Texas Two-Step' tickets and a couple of 'Pick Threes'.*"

All of a sudden, you are confused. You assume that this Christian knows what he is doing when he plays the lottery. So, you're not judging him for playing the lottery.

But, because of your personal history, you don't feel good about playing. It still seems like an "unclean" thing to you.

Yet, on this day, because your brother played, you go ahead and play, too.

And, based on what Paul just said, you sinned when you played because you did something that you thought was wrong. It was, therefore, wrong for you.

The point of my parable is to show that some Christians - especially those Christians with "history" - will be in trouble if they follow the lead of a fellow-Christian who exercises his or her liberty.

In my example, the weaker Christian will have sinned because he didn't yet possess the confidence to exercise that freedom to play a lottery game.

So, now you're thinking, "*Oh great, Dave is telling me I'm free to have some harmless fun, exercise my liberty in Jesus AND he's also telling me that I can't have any fun because of what that fun might do to someone else. So... what? Shouldn't my brother be big enough to come to mature opinions and convictions on his own?*"

Well, yes, he should. And, given time and maturity and growth, he will.

Paul would urge all of us to develop personal convictions before God about issues that are grey or questionable or simply not specifically addressed in the Bible.

And I further think that we should try to be as expansive as possible. Aim to be strong!

The point is not that we are to allow everything about our conduct to be determined by the weaknesses of others.¹¹ That would make us paranoid to do anything.

¹¹ Of course, it is a great thing if the more emancipated Christian can guide the weaker Christian into a more liberated conscience, but this process can't be rushed.

The point is to be aware of what is most important. The danger is that I might allow my love for my freedoms to surpass my love for my family in Jesus - and that would be a problem.

Destroying an object of Jesus' love (vv. 15b-16)

Again, listen to Paul's strong language. He writes, **[15] Do not destroy...**"

And, no, by **"destroy"** Paul doesn't mean that we condemn the weak Christian to death or Hell.

By **"destroy"** he means that we have placed a stumbling-block in front of the weak, the tentative, the undecided, the doubtful. We have placed before him a temptation to sin.

The weak Christian may imitate the actions of the strong without having yet arrived at the clear conscience before God that the strong Christian has wrestled with God to achieve.

When the strong enjoys his freedom to the detriment of the weak, that weaker brother's walk with Christ is compromised. His internal bearings are skewed. His conscience is seared.

And who is this that we are hurting by the exercise of our freedom?

[15b]...Do not destroy with your choice of food THE PERSON FOR WHOM CHRIST DIED. [16] Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil.¹²

What a powerful reminder to us all that Jesus loves us all. He loves:
those who have an expansive sense a freedom and those who don't.
those who play the lottery and those who don't.

those who are free to drink alcohol and those who aren't.
those who celebrate Christmas and Easter and Halloween and those who don't.

What a pity it would be to derail the development of a work of God in a brother or sister in Christ for the sake of anything so trivial as food or drink or entertainment.

There are all sorts of legitimate activities we are free to enjoy. Love requires that we partake of some of those freedoms with discretion, lest some Christian family member stumbles and falls.

So, we have been set free so that we can learn to LOVE.

Paul next points out that we have also been given freedom so that we will be conformed to the image of Jesus, so that we will become people of CHARACTER.

Freedom - to Grow in Character (vv. 17-18)

[17] for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. [18] For the one who serves Christ in this way is acceptable to God and approved by other people.

Living under the Lordship of Jesus (submitting to His kingdom rule) is not, ultimately, about enjoying our freedoms.

No, living in and for the kingdom of God is all about the formation of our character, the growth of our souls.

So, here's a gauge to check on your spiritual dashboard.

Be alert when the exercise of your freedoms becomes your chief concern. Watch out when you get upset about having to install a governor that limits your freedoms to protect someone else's tender conscience.

Those are signals that you've started to stray from the interests of God's kingdom.

¹² Weighty. When we cause our brother to stumble by the exercise of our freedoms, then our freedoms - and even the Gospel itself - will be spoken of as evil.

We have been set free in Jesus so that we can love well and so that we can become people of character.

Finally, we have been set free in Jesus so that we might help each other out, here and now.

Freedom - to Build Each Other Up (v. 19)

[19] So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

It is a very good thing to be strong in faith and to have a liberated conscience. But enjoying our freedoms is not the best thing.

No, one of the things better than enjoying our freedoms is allowing God to use you to build someone up.

When the ancient Greeks described the construction of a sturdy home, they used the word Paul uses here, ***“build up.”*** It is a construction term.

Imagine this. You are God’s workman. You add planks to your friend’s life. You build him or her up in faith, courage, and wisdom.

Over time you help your friend understand Scripture, help him navigate relationships biblically, lead her to know how to pray.

And as a result of your friendship, over time, your friend’s faith becomes solid.

You have poured your life into your friend and the result is that your friend has a Jesus-centered life that will withstand life’s storms.

God has richly blessed me by peppering my life with men and women, skilled in construction, who have built me up in my faith.

Beginning in my earliest days as a Christian, when my church’s youth group was led by Bob, Bill, and Dwain, there has been a steady stream of people who have poured their lives into me, blown wind into

my sails, added necessary planks to my faith, trained me, taught me, corrected me.

To this day I am surrounded by people who are building me up.

And I thank God that I see it happening everywhere I look. I watch as parents pour into their own kids, Sunday School teachers “build up” children in their classes, and youth leaders do the same.

“Building up” goes on in every Care Group, Adult Bible Fellowship, Bible study, and prayer group at our church. “Building up” is what we do. That’s what you are called to do.

You are invited to the awesome privilege of “building up” your friends in Jesus. Each one of us here this morning has the privilege of adding bricks, mortar, and planks to the lives of others.

You can be the workman God is pleased to use to help your friend get solid in Jesus.

What a sadness it would be if your construction work in the life of your friend was halted, was derailed, because you chose to exercise a freedom that caused your friend to stumble.

Christian, Use Your Strength for Good! (vv. 20-21)

[20] Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the person who eats and causes offense.

[21] It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine¹³, or to do anything by which your brother or sister stumbles.

A careless exercise of liberty tears people down. It’s like ripping out the cornerstone of a solid building. It’s like taking a wrecking ball to a carefully crafted structure.

¹³ This is the first time in the section that we get a clue that wine-drinking was involved in the scruples of the weak in first century Rome.

Of course, you completely understand that food and drink and such are not the main issues in life. Stuff like that doesn't make much of a difference in the eternal scheme of things.

But when your friend's "house" is only partially built, still in the earliest phases of construction, you don't add to the mix something that might make her stumble.

No, you install a governor on your personal freedom to protect your friend at a fragile, vulnerable stage of development.

Today, God's Word calls us to commit to never consciously do anything to cause our fellow Jesus follower to stumble. We're to keep an eye out for anything that might cause a trip and a fall - and avoid it like the plague!

Obviously, nobody is omniscient. We will never know ALL that might negatively impact our fellow Christians, and I'm not suggesting a life of paranoia.

But part of what is implied in "love one another" is "know one another." And the better we get at knowing one another, the better equipped we will be at NOT placing stumbling blocks in each others' paths.

Conclusion:

The great German reformer, Martin Luther, said, "*A Christian is a most free lord of all, subject to none.*" - TRUE!

The liberties we enjoy in Christ are incredible. We have been given authority over all God's creation, knowing that everything created by God is good, and is not to be rejected if it is received with gratitude.

But then, Luther added, "*A Christian is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all.*" - Also TRUE!

You are free to do some things you will choose to NOT do so that you can obey Jesus' commandment to love.