

LEARNING HOW TO BE A GOOD WINNER

ROMANS 14:13-23

By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn

M.I. EVEN THOUGH WE HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO LIVE OUT OUR FREEDOM IN CHRIST, FOR THE SAKE OF OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST, AND IN ORDER TO IMITATE CHRIST, IT IS OFTEN BETTER FOR US TO RESTRAIN OURSELVES.

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As we talked about last week, when we live in a close knit community there are bound to be disagreements that arise between individuals and groups, also when this community is a church, the disagreements seem to take on an even more exaggerated intensity. With this exaggerated intensity comes the heightened possibility to fracture the community.

Further we said that what fuels this is the thought that we are trying to honor God by our actions. Let me remind us that Paul is talking about the non-essentials of the faith. If some group is saying that Jesus is not fully God and fully man, then we must battle for the truth. If someone is teaching another way of salvation beside the grace we receive through faith in Jesus Christ, then that is an issue to argue about.

However, in issues that are not so clear, issues that honest to goodness evangelicals disagree about, we must approach each other with love. We are to embrace one another and the guiding principle should be a desire to maintain unity. Paul commands us not to judge one another concerning these issues, nor are we to look down on one another, or despise one another. He gave three reasons why we are called to embrace one another even though we may have disagreements. First, we were all saved the same way, by grace through faith. Second, we all serve the same Lord Jesus Christ who died for us and saved us. And third, because we are family. Since we all belong to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are all brothers and sisters.

In this morning's passage, Paul is going to address the strong, those who enjoy more freedom in Christ, keep in mind, Paul considers those who are legalistic in their

faith as the weak. To someone who is not a Christian, these weak Christians may appear to be stronger because they attempt to keep many rules, but the Bible looks at legalistic Christians as the weaker brothers and sisters.

Here is what is interesting: Paul calls on the stronger Christians to be more gracious and to give up some of their rights for the good of their weaker brothers and sisters. This is interesting because I have noticed over the years that I have seen more people gracious in losing than in winning. Take for example my son these days. I haven't won playing golf for a while, and he makes sure to remind me of that often. Or when he beats me at racket-ball, he will get in my face and scream, "Who's your daddy?"

I think when I win; I am just as poor a winner as he is, maybe it's genetic. But, I think it's hard to be a good winner. Paul wants these strong Christians to learn how to be good winners; their main concern is not to rub their freedom in weak Christians' faces. Instead, he is going to instruct them how to be good winners, how to use their freedom productively.

You see, when we are not careful how we use our freedom, we can affect others as well. Sometimes we can hurt and insult others by our self-centered egos. Let me give you an example.

Three famous surgeons were bragging about their skills. "A man came to me who had his hand cut off, said one, but today that man is a concert violinist."

"That's nothing," said another. "A guy came to me who had his legs cut off. I stitched them back on, and today that man is a marathon runner."

“I can top both of you,” said the third. “One day I came on the scene of a terrible accident. There was nothing left but a horse’s behind and a pair of glasses. Today that man is seated in the United States Senate.”

Paul is asking those of us who are strong in faith to act with restraint in regards to our freedom.

If you are a person who enjoys freedom in your faith, Paul is going to ask you to look at your rights and privileges from a different perspective: **EVEN THOUGH WE HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO LIVE OUT OUR FREEDOM IN CHRIST ... FOR THE SAKE OF OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST ... AND IN ORDER TO IMITATE CHRIST ... IT IS OFTEN BETTER FOR US TO RESTRAIN OURSELVES.**

We can do this only if we start to gain a different perspective on life. Our culture teaches us to be self-centered and fight for our rights. When we see professional athletes trash-talking one another, we accept that, if he can back it up with his play. But in today’s passage, Paul is going to command us to set aside our rights and privileges for the benefit of those who are weaker in the faith. He wants us to approach this life we live in Christian community from a different perspective.

I. WINNING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LOVE (Vs. 13-16)
IN ORDER TO IMITATE CHRIST’S LOVE, WE WILL OFTEN CHOOSE NOT TO EXERCISE OUR RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES.

In verses 13-16, he commands us to approach our freedom from the perspective of love: **IN ORDER TO IMITATE CHRIST’S LOVE, WE WILL OFTEN CHOOSE NOT TO EXERCISE OUR RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES.**

Again, I don't think this is a hard concept to understand. The word Christian means little Christ, we are to imitate Christ as we live our every day lives. Jesus demonstrated His love for God the Father by submitting to His will and obeying His commands. He loved us by setting aside all the privileges He had as God in order to save us and set us free. We are to love in the same way. If you are a person who is strong in the faith, if you are a person who enjoys your freedom in Christ, then Paul is calling on you this morning to set aside your rights and privileges in order to love fellow believers who are not as strong in the faith.

A. DECIDING TO LOVE (V. 13)

In verse 13, Paul talks about love as a decision, in our approach to the community of believers, we must consciously be deciding to love. The first sentence of verse 13 summarizes what we talked about last week in verses 1-12; namely, that we should not pass judgment on one another. Now I want us to keep this in mind, since this has to do with disputable matters, not the fundamentals of the faith. For the church in Rome, the issues were, should one eat meat that was not kosher, and did they have to follow Sabbath and holy day regulations. For us, the issues could be the type and mode of baptism, music style, social drinking, dancing, smoking, divorce and remarriage, women in leadership positions, and others. We said that a good test for us as to which issues fall into this category is to see where honest-to-goodness evangelicals disagree as to the position or not. Where they do, then each of us must follow our own conviction and not try to argue another into our way of thinking. Paul summarizes what he has just said by saying, "stop passing judgment on one another." Included in this is that we are not to

look down on one another or despise one another, instead we are to embrace one another in love.

He has described the weaker Christians as those who take a more legalistic approach to Christianity and he refers to the strong as the more liberated Christian. We are to embrace one another in love and not to make a big deal about these disputable matters because: 1. We were all saved the same way, by grace through faith in Jesus, 2. We all serve the same Lord, Jesus Christ Who is the author and perfecter of our salvation, and 3. Since we inherit God as our Father through salvation, we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are all family.

I think that the second half of verse 13 shows where our attention should be focused. Instead of focusing negative attention on the other, we would all do well to focus our attention on eradicating our own negative thoughts and behaviors. Paul uses a nice little play on the word to pass judgment. Look carefully at verse 13 where he says, “stop passing judgment on one another.” “Instead,” now look at the next phrase, “make up your mind.” That is the same word as passing judgment. He’s almost saying, “Instead of judging one another, judge your own thoughts and behaviors. Stop deciding what’s right and wrong for other people. Decide what’s right and wrong for you.”

And here is a good start; decide not to be the source of another Christian’s downfall. The first word Paul uses is a stumbling block; literally it means a tripping or falling. In a spiritual sense it means a spiritual fall or setback. Don’t be the source of another Christian’s setback in his or her walk with God. Don’t trip them and cause them to break a leg.

The next word he uses is a little more tragic; he says, don't be an obstacle in their way. This is the same word we get scandal from, it means a trap. Spiritually the word usually means a spiritual downfall. This is not merely a setback; it is a falling away from the faith.

Here is what Paul wants us to hear and feel: Do you think your opinion is so important to you that you are willing to risk driving someone away from their faith in Christ, causing them to lose their salvation in order to convince them that you are right? Are you willing to cause other Christians pain and fracture your relationship with them over some doctrine or theology you may be mistaken about?

B. DECIDING TO UNDERSTAND LOVE (V. 14)

His answer is loud and clear, "No!" In verse 14 he reminds us that if we want to imitate Christ in love, we have to decide to understand love. Paul clearly states where he falls on this issue of eating kosher, he says, "I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself." Paul is not worried if the meat is religiously clean or unclean. He doesn't care if it was a specific animal. He doesn't care how it was butchered, and he isn't even concerned if it was used in some pagan religious ceremony. Jesus pointed out that no food could make us unclean. Graphically Jesus proved the point by saying that food merely passes through the digestive tract and good or bad, we end up pooping it out.

Jesus said that it's our attitude, our hearts, and our minds that are the source of becoming religiously unclean and dirty before God. So Paul is liberated in his thinking towards food. He considers his faith strong; he can eat anything and everything without being concerned that it affects his relationship with God.

But he is just as quick to remind the church that there are those Christians who find comfort in religious rules. If they think, that by abstaining from certain foods is a way in which they can honor God then those foods that are not kosher are unclean to them. Later, Paul will explain that it becomes a matter of conscience. Let me mention this in passing that those of us who were raised in the West may have a problem with this. One act, the same act, can be perfectly fine for one person and a sin for another. Let me demonstrate how this could happen at the church in Rome: Two Christians may find themselves going to the circus. At the circus, one Christian may eat a hot dog and be fine, yet another Christian, one who is struggling with this concept, eats a hot dog, and it is sin.

In our culture, one person may wear earrings and it would be perfectly O.K., but for another, it may be a sin. For some women, they can come to church with no head covering, and it would be O.K., but for some women not to wear a head covering, it would be a sin. It has everything to do with our consciences. We will explain that a little later.

C. DECIDING TO IMITATE CHRIST IN LOVE (Vs. 15-16)

But for now, the principle Paul wants to drive at is this: Even though we have a right to live the liberated life in Christ, one of our self-imposed boundaries to our freedom should be love. In verses 15-16 we are encouraged to make a decision to imitate Christ in love.

I know that those of you who have come from legalistic backgrounds, and have been able to shake free from it and live free in Christ are not going to like this, nevertheless, the Bible is clear about this. Since you are now the stronger Christian, you

are obligated to approach your weaker brothers and sisters in the same sacrificial, loving way, that Jesus lived life. Paul says that we are not to flaunt our freedom. Let's say that I feel free to smoke and drink, however, I have friends who strongly believe that smoking and drinking are a sin. Here is the rule: If I go out to eat with my friend, I am not to order a drink with dinner or to have an after dinner cigar. If I were by myself or with more liberated friends, the drink and the cigar would be perfectly fine, but if I have that same drink and smoke while with my more legalistic friend, then I am sinning. Why? Look at the second sentence in verse 15: Because I may be destroying her faith. That word for destroy almost always means eternal destruction. She may become so frustrated with Christianity that she gives up the faith. I've got to tell you I know there are many in this congregation with weak faith and a real misunderstanding of Christianity. Let me take a moment to address you: I know that many of you think that if you are a Christian and obey all the rules that life should go smoothly for you the way you expect it should. And if it doesn't then you may reason, "Why should I be a Christian at all?" Please, I urge you to let go of that thinking. Jesus, Paul, and the disciples suffered a great deal. I would be willing to bet that their lives were much more dedicated to serving God than any of ours. So keeping the rules doesn't guarantee anything.

Let me again remind us why we are Christians. We have placed our faith and trust in Jesus Christ because that is the only way we can be reconciled to God. Our eternal destinies were changed from death to life. Period! If you're looking for some formula for health, wealth and success, then you have chosen the wrong religion. Please, I want to encourage you in the strongest possible terms to let go of these wrong expectations because they will destroy you in the end.

Now back to the strong Christians. Do you see how shaky the faith of your weaker brothers and sisters are? Given the fact that exercising your freedom to drink, smoke or wear jewelry, can end up destroying their saving faith in Christ, is it really worth having that drink, wearing those earrings, wearing those pants, or having that smoke in front of them?

Please, don't flaunt your freedom. I'm glad that many of you have been able to break free from the slavery of legalistic Christianity. That's a good thing. But look at verse 16: Don't let this good thing turn into evil by destroying your weaker brother's faith. That would be evil. I can tell you personally there is not a beer tasty enough or a cigar smooth enough that's worth losing a Christian brother or sister over. I'm sure we all have weaker brothers and sisters in our lives, please handle them with grace: **IN ORDER TO IMITATE CHRIST'S LOVE, WE WILL OFTEN CHOOSE NOT TO EXERCISE OUR RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES.** That truly is a sacrifice of love.

II. **WINNING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF STRENGTH (Vs. 17-21)
HAVING A GOOD PERSPECTIVE ON THE PRIORITIES OF WHAT'S IMPORTANT IN LIFE AND WHAT'S NOT WILL OFTEN CAUSE US NOT TO EXERCISE OUR RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES.**

Verses 17-21 give us some pointers in winning from the perspective of strength. I think that once we understand something, it's easier for us to do it, even if it's unpleasant: **HAVING A GOOD PERSPECTIVE ON THE PRIORITIES OF WHAT'S IMPORTANT IN LIFE AND WHAT'S NOT WILL OFTEN CAUSE US NOT TO EXERCISE OUR RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES.** In the last section, we said that if exercising our freedom caused another person to lose their salvation or set them seriously back in their faith, it would certainly not be worth exercising our freedom, we would willingly restrain ourselves.

A. KNOWING WHAT'S IMPORTANT (V. 17-18)

In verses 17-18, Paul tells us to know what's important in life. We chase after so many things in this world; we want good jobs, we want to make money, we want to live in good houses, eat at good restaurants, and entertain ourselves. We want to enjoy the good life as television and culture define the good life. But, Jesus put all of life in perspective when He said that we are not to worry about what we are going to eat or drink or all the other stuff. Instead, we are to seek first the Kingdom of God. God's kingdom is characterized by righteousness, peace, and joy. Notice it didn't say that God's kingdom was characterized by large homes, large bank accounts, or fancy cars. Righteousness means the way we relate to one another as God's children. We are to be feeding the poor, preaching the gospel, helping one another to grow and mature in faith. Peace doesn't mean that we enjoy lives free from problems and conflict. Peace is knowing that we are reconciled to God, and don't have to worry about death. It means being in a right relationship with God and with one another. Joy is learning to be content in every and all situations because we trust that God is in control. Living the kingdom life is learning to serve Jesus as Lord. Again, Paul wants us to ask the question, "What's more important, advancing the gospel and the kingdom of God, or exercising my rights to eat what I want and to wear what I want?" For Paul, it was no contest. For him, building up the kingdom of God was everything. Let me give you an example from Paul's life: Paul strongly preached against the necessity of circumcision. However, in order to effectively minister to Jews, he had his coworker, Timothy, circumcised so as not to let that become an issue. Let's keep that in mind as we come in contact with Christians who are not so liberated in the faith.

B. PURSUING WHAT'S IMPORTANT (V. 19)

Verse 19 spells out the reasoning. We must not let these things become issues that keep us from pursuing what's important. Paul says, "Let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification," let's pursue those things that make the church better. Let me take an example: In most cases, legalistic Christians have some serious attitude problems. Women will cover their heads, but in reality are not very submissive. Often times it may be better for them to cover their mouths than their heads. They are often very exact in outward signs, but very sinful with inward attitudes. Often they gossip, have inward hatred, and hold some very judgmental attitudes. Now if you were to go to their church and flaunt your freedom, you would have absolutely no possibility of helping them overcome some serious sin, they would be so focused on your clothes that they would never hear a word you said. You would spend all your time debating whether or not it is acceptable or unacceptable to come into church without a hat. Now isn't that a stupid waste of time... especially if you think hats are not the issue?

Wouldn't it be better not to get involved in that? Paul would say, "Wear the hat, conform to the dress code, then hopefully you can get them to look at their attitudes that are fracturing the community." Look, getting rid of gossip, malicious behavior, hate, jealousy, judgmentalism, divisive attitudes are issues that are worthwhile. Arguing about whether or not to wear a hat is plain stupid. Here is the question we must ask ourselves, "Am I strong enough in my faith, and humble enough in my attitude to conform to the weaker brother's rules in order to help her deal with real issues that are preventing her to become more Christ-like? Evangelism, healing, visiting the sick, welcoming strangers,

and building up the body to unity through exercising our spiritual gifts are all important. Let go of unimportant issues.

C. ACTING ON WHAT'S IMPORTANT (V. 20-21)

It's not enough to know what's important and to pursue just what's important, verses 20-21 remind us that we are to act on what's important. I want you to be ready, because in order to pull this off we have to be both strong and humble. Let's say that I have a friend who continues to chide me about drinking and smoking. I make up my mind that whenever I am with him, I will meet him smelling like smoke or drink and I will not smoke or drink when I am with him. We meet for dinner and he notices that I don't order wine, nor do I look for a smoke, he proudly says to me, "I see that you have finally gotten with the program and have given up those filthy sins of smoking and drinking." Now you know what's running through my mind, don't you. I want to let him have it, but because I am prepared to act on what's important, I catch myself and understand that the real issue is self-control. I need to be self-controlled and so does my friend. I then may say something like, "You know, I struggle with self-control in my life. I find that often times I catch myself being judgmental. I see that Jesus takes this very seriously; He said, don't judge others if you don't want to be judged. I struggle with that a lot. Do you?"

Now he may or may not respond. But at least I am not going to let the focus be on something as unimportant as smoking or drinking. I have gone out of my way to make room for God to work. I have tried to stay out of the way and now it will be between my brother and God. I hope we are starting to get the idea because: **HAVING A GOOD PERSPECTIVE ON THE PRIORITIES OF WHAT'S IMPORTANT IN**

LIFE AND WHAT'S NOT WILL OFTEN CAUSE US NOT TO EXERCISE OUR RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES.

III. WINNING FROM A PERSPECTIVE OF FAITH (Vs. 22-23)
KNOWING THAT WE HAVE THE RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES TO ACT OUT OUR FREEDOM IN CHRIST WILL OFTEN CAUSE US TO BE CONTENT ENOUGH TO RESTRAIN OURSELVES FROM ACTING OUT ON OUR FREEDOM.

So you see it becomes easier to be gracious when we operate from a perspective of love and strength. And, verses 22-23 give us yet one more perspective, winning from a perspective of faith: **KNOWING THAT WE HAVE THE RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES TO ACT OUT OUR FREEDOM IN CHRIST WILL OFTEN CAUSE US TO BE CONTENT ENOUGH TO RESTRAIN OURSELVES FROM ACTING OUT ON OUR FREEDOM.** I think that knowing I am free in these matters takes all the importance off of them. You know teenagers want to drink alcohol. Why? Because, it's forbidden. However, when they turn 21 and they can drink legally, it somehow loses the excitement.

A. SILENT IN STRENGTH (V. 22a)

The first half of verse 22 points out that we can be silent in strength. Let's say I am a woman who is very comfortable wearing jewelry. I have settled the issue in my mind and before God. If I am truly strong and if I am truly right in my relationship with God, look at verse 22, then I can keep it between me and God. I will feel no need to go back to my legalist brothers and flaunt my freedom before them ... nor will I feel the need to go back and argue with them and convince them that my view is right. No, when I go to be with them, I would take off my jewelry, and the topic would never come up. Isn't that what Paul is saying?

B. HAPPINESS IN STRENGTH (V. 22b)

Look at the second half of verse 22. It tells why we can be silent, because there is happiness in strength. It's a blessing to be liberated. It's nice to be free to live without worrying about all these crazy rules. In fact, it frees me to work on more serious sin in my life. I can tell you that if the biggest sin I had to deal with in my life is what I ate or drank, or what I wore, I would be a happy guy. Remember, Jesus said it is what comes out of our hearts that condemn us and make us unclean. So I'm basically happy that I can use my energy to deal with real sin in my life. So don't use this freedom and energy to argue with others, use this freedom and energy to pursue holiness and righteousness.

C. GROWING IN STRENGTH (V. 23)

As verse 23 points out, the only way to grow in strength is to grow in faith. The nature of faith is that it is action based on what we believe. We cannot convince legalistic Christians that they are enslaved to rules. It is only as their faith grows in their confidence in Jesus that their freedom will grow. Be thankful for your freedom, and trust God to work on their hearts, as God frees their consciences, they will find more freedom.

But for now, just be reassured of your freedom: **KNOWING THAT WE HAVE THE RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES TO ACT OUT OUR FREEDOM IN CHRIST, WILL OFTEN CAUSE US TO BE CONTENT ENOUGH TO RESTRAIN OURSELVES FROM ACTING OUT ON OUR FREEDOM.**

Please, if you're a strong, liberated Christian, be a good winner. Be gracious with those who have not found their freedom and liberation yet. I know it will be hard because legalistic Christians tend to be judgmental, but if indeed you are stronger then be gracious. Our freedom must be tempered with love. You see: **EVEN THOUGH**

WE HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO LIVE OUT OUR FREEDOM IN CHRIST ... FOR THE SAKE OF OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST ... AND IN ORDER TO IMITATE CHRIST ... IT IS OFTEN BETTER FOR US TO RESTRAIN OURSELVES.

This kind of sacrificial love can bring about some powerful testimony of who God is. Listen to this story of a pastor who demonstrated this kind of strong, humble love.

On My Enemy's Behalf:

During the Revolutionary War, there was a faithful gospel preacher by the name of Peter Miller. He lived near a fellow who hated him intensely for his Christian life and testimony. In fact, this man violently opposed him and ridiculed his followers. One day the unbeliever was found guilty of treason and sentenced to death. Hearing about this, Peter Miller set out on foot to intercede for the man's life before George Washington. The general listened to the minister's earnest plea but told him he didn't feel he should pardon the minister's friend. "My friend! He is not my friend," answered Miller. "In fact, he's my worst living enemy." "What?" Washington said. "You have walked sixty miles to save the life of your enemy? That, in my judgment, puts the matter in a different light. I will grant your request." With pardon in hand, Miller hastened to the place where his neighbor was to be executed, and arrived just as the prisoner was walking to the scaffold. When the traitor saw Miller, he exclaimed "Old Peter Miller has come to have his revenge by watching me hang!" But he was astonished as he watched the minister step out of the crowd and produce the pardon that spared his life.