

**WHAT CAN WE EAT?
ANSWERS ABOUT LIBERTY (PART 3)
ROMANS 14:10-12**

Have you noticed how many times a day you are given warnings? Among my favorites

- ✓ On a cup of coffee — “Caution: Contents Hot” (yes, isn’t that the point?)
- ✓ On a **Dremel** rotary tool: “This product is not intended for use as a dental drill.”
- ✓ On Rowenta irons — “Do not iron clothes on body.”
- ✓ On Frankel’s Costume Superman costumes — “Warning: This costume does not enable flight or super strength.”
- ✓ On an early version of an **Apple iPod**: “Do not eat iPod Shuffle.”
- ✓ On multiple **chainsaw brands**: “Do not hold the wrong end of the chainsaw.”
- ✓ On a Staple’s **letter opener**: “Safety goggles recommended.”



We are given so many warnings that we tend to ignore them all. A paper in the [Harvard Business Review](#) a few years ago addressed that very issue. They recounted the origin of all our warning labels: the enactment of the Federal Caustic Poison Act (1927). Then safety labels became required for food and drug items in 1938, and by the 1980s, warning labels were routine on most consumer products. *Everything* seemingly now has a warning. But the explosion of warnings doesn’t distinguish between *possible* harms and genuine, realistic risks, so “People’s eyes glaze over when they look at a warning...They simply don’t read it at all.”

Sometimes when we read the Bible we are tempted to approach it in the same way: “it’s another warning; keep going, don’t worry about it...” But Biblical warnings are never overstated (because they come from God). They are always given because there already is a problem or there is a genuine risk that it will become a problem. And that is exactly what Paul addresses in the last part of Romans 14 and the use of our liberties. In the first part of the chapter, he talked to both the weak and the strong; in the last half of the chapter (and into chapter 15), he addressed the strong and how they handled their liberties.

Because they are strong, there is a temptation to say, “It really *is* a liberty; it’s not a sin. I am free, and I can do this, so I will.” And the strong act without thinking about the implications of what they are doing. And we *must* think about those implications for the sake of others, as Paul has emphasized throughout ch. 14 —

USE YOUR INDIVIDUAL FREEDOMS AS A MEANS OF PRESERVING THE CORPORATE UNITY OF THE BODY.

Paul addresses the strong in the remainder of the chapter (and in ch. 15) with **four warnings** about the use of their liberties. Specifically, the use of liberties can provoke a variety of wrong consequences; Paul wants us to enjoy our liberties, but only enjoy them when they produce the intended results. So, he warns us:

1. **Do Not Let Your Use of Liberty Provoke Others to STUMBLE (vv. 13-14)**
2. **Do Not Let Your Use of Liberty Provoke You to Be UNLOVING (v. 15)**
3. **Do Not Let Your Use of Liberty Provoke Others to Speak Evil of THE GOSPEL (v. 16)**
4. **Do Not Let Your Use of Liberty Provoke You to Forget GOSPEL PURPOSES (vv. 17-18)**

1. Do Not Let Your Use of Liberty Provoke Others to **STUMBLE** (vv. 13-14)

- In verse 12, Paul made a conclusion that was applicable to both the strong and the weak — whether you eat or don't eat meat (or regardless of which feasts you keep), there is an accounting that is coming before the Lord (v. 12). He finishes that conclusion in the first part of v. 13 — **let us not judge one another anymore**.
 - ✓ It seems clear from that phrase that the Roman church was doing the very thing that Paul is now telling them not to do; and with the 1st person pronoun (**us**) he includes himself in that admonition.
 - ✓ This is a reminder that it is so easy to be critical and judgmental of others when they make decisions that are different from us. Why wouldn't they eat bacon or mow the lawn on Sunday afternoon or go to a movie or vacation at the beach or spend \$15 on a hamburger or...
 - ✓ This isn't the first time that he has exhorted them not to judge (see vv. 3, 4, 10). We are prone to criticism and judgmentalism. This is a simple exhortation: *stop it*.
- Now there is a kind of judgment that is appropriate — **but (alla) rather determine this...**
 - ✓ **Determine** is the same word "judge." In other words, "If you are going to judge, judge this..."
 - ✓ And the admonition is for everyone to judge himself. It's self-evaluation. The question I need to answer is not, "what are *they* doing?" but "what am *I* doing?"
- Paul calls us to make a very specific evaluation — **not to put an obstacle or stumbling block in a brother's way**.
 - ✓ The words **obstacle** and **stumbling block** are essentially synonymous. They are things that cause others to trip and fall (like the cables that we used to have on the Min. Bldg. floor).
 - ✓ The terms were used of literal tripping hazards, but as the NT uses them, they often refer to spiritual tripping hazards — things that we do that entice others to engage in sin.
 - ✓ What is notable here is that Paul is envisioning something intentional and purposeful. We *place* an obstacle in the pathway of others, *intending* that they fall (or not caring if they fall). In fact, if there is a nuance between the two words, it is that **stumbling block** might imply a trap or snare, which again points to something that is purposeful.
 - ✓ As in v. 10, Paul emphasizes that this action is taken against a **brother**. We have harmed the one with whom we are closest; we are in purposeful fellowship with him, and we spiritually hurt him. It is the exact opposite of what Paul has called for (13:8) and what Jesus demanded (Jn. 13:34-35).

- How can Paul say we are intentionally trying to cause others to stumble and fall into sin? We are just practicing genuine liberties. Paul answers the potential question in v. 14.
 - ✓ When he says that he **knows and is convinced that nothing is unclean in itself**, he is affirming that he is aware of the teaching of Christ and the NT — Christ has fulfilled the Law and foods will no longer make people ceremonially unclean. To what does “unclean” refer?
 - The OT identified a variety of foods (and other practices) that made the OT worshipper “unclean.” To eat those foods was not inherently sinful (except for the rebellion of disobeying the Law) — pigs and shellfish are not inherently sinful (like an act of lying or adultery).
 - So why were there things that the OT said made them ritually unclean? Two reasons:
 - ... Not eating those foods *distinguished the Jews from every other nation* and set them apart as different/distinct. When they ate those things, it was suggesting, “we are no different than everyone else.” Cf. **Lev. 20:22-26** — laws of “cleanliness” were connected to following God.
 - ... Ritual, physical uncleanness *pictured the spiritually reality*: man’s heart is sinful and needs to be cleansed and forgiven (and he is unable to do it himself). So, to return to worship he needs to be “cleansed” from the defilement of ritual uncleanness (e.g., **Lk. 2:21ff**) to indicate the need for spiritual forgiveness (which we saw in **2:28-29**; we need clean hearts).
 - Three statements about food and cleanliness help us: **Mk. 7:14, 19**; **Acts 10:14-15**; **1 Tim. 4:3**.
 - Paul is affirming he is convinced about these statements: we may eat what we want (**1 Cor. 8:4**).
 - ✓ We should also recognize that as soon as Paul said this, he probably would have received a lot of nodding heads from meat eaters — “that’s right Paul, we can eat it all!” But he quickly tempers that.
 - ✓ **But to him who thinks anything to be unclean** — i.e., if their evaluation is it is unclean (even when it is not), then *for him it is unclean* and to practice it leads him to violate his conscience.
 - So we put an obstacle in the spiritual path of weaker brothers when we eat what we can rightly eat and enjoy, but the weaker brother sees us eating and he joins with us even though his conscience is yelling at him, “Don’t eat!!!” We’ve provoked him to ignore his conscience.
 - If you think something is unclean (inhibits your walk with Christ), don’t do it. And if your example of doing something leads others to sin against their conscience, don’t do it (e.g., Terry and Raye Jeanne deciding not to drink alcohol under any circumstance).
 - The spiritual health of my brother is more important than the exercise of my liberty.
 - ✓ How can Paul say using our liberty might intentionally cause others to sin? Because we just don’t care about the impact of our actions on others. We may not say, “I hope they sin against their conscience...” but not even thinking about the possibility that our actions might lead others to sin demonstrates that we don’t care for our brothers. By the use of our liberties, we demonstrate that we are only concerned for what we get and want and we don’t care about others, which leads to...

2. Do Not Let Your Use of Liberty Provoke You to Be UNLOVING (v. 15)

- When we flaunt the exercise of our liberties without considering others, there are two outcomes: one outcome relates to others and the other relates to ourselves.
- When we use our liberties indiscriminately, we **hurt** and **destroy** others spiritually.
 - ✓ The word **hurt** is a word of pain — internal sadness, grief, and distress. It's the word that was used about Peter's sorrow when Christ questioned him (Jn. 21:17). The hurt in this situation is that the weaker brother experiences condemnation from his conscience: "I've done something wrong; I've sinned...I did what I knew I should not do." This is far more than an "annoyance." And it's the fault of the stronger brother. We provoked them; their grief is our fault.
 - ✓ The situation is even worse than that — **for the sake of food** (a piece of bacon!), we **destroy**. That word is often used of eternal destruction and condemnation in Hell. I don't think he means that literally, since he speaks of them as "brothers" — and **Christ died for them** (cf. 1 Cor. 8:11). But he does mean that they suffer loss (probably **righteousness, joy, and peace**, v. 17, among others).
 - ✓ Their spiritual progress is harmed in a very significant way. And it is because I "had to have" my liberty and my freedom and my rights. That may be American, but it's not Christian.
- The other outcome of using our liberties indiscriminately is on us: **we are no longer walking according to love**. The implication is that they had been living in loving ways. But no longer.
 - ✓ Loving others in the body of Christ (our **brothers**, vv. 10, 13, 15, 21) is central to what we are. Jesus made it so when he put us together; He could not have commanded it more clearly (Jn. 13:34-35).
 - ✓ Hear the import of this: Christ loved them enough to leave the glory of Heaven and all the rights and privileges He was afforded there (Phil. 2:4ff) and die for them (Rom. 5:6-8). And we (at times) don't love the weak enough to give up the use of our liberties. How tragic (for both weak & strong).
 - ✓ If we do not love others enough to give up our liberties, then our spiritual integrity is at stake. [Murray] This is one of GBC's core values — "we believe in 'every member ministry' — our relationship with other believers," so that we are with one another, being used by God to build up one another. Relationships in the church are no small thing — they are eternal and of eternal value.
 - ✓ When we use our liberties without care, that gets lost and destroyed.
 - ✓ The love of this body for one another has been something that has made us unique for decades. We do it well (not perfectly, but well). We want to continue to love well — even when it "costs" me what I want to do (and what I might otherwise rightly be able to do). Cf. 1 Thess. 4:1, 9-10.
 - ✓ Loving others is a non-negotiable for believers of Christ and members of GBC.

3. Do Not Let Your Use of Liberty Provoke Others to Speak Evil of THE GOSPEL (v. 16)

- When we exercise our genuine liberties, we are doing something *good* — Christ has come to liberate us from the bondage of the Law. He did what we could not so we could be free (e.g., Rom. 7).
- But when we exercise those good liberties indiscriminately and to the detriment of our brothers (acting in unloving ways), then we tempt people to *speak evil* about that good thing.
 - ✓ It could be that Paul means that people speak evil about those genuine liberties.
 - ✓ It is more probable that he means they speak evil about the gospel that frees us to enjoy liberties. The evil statement might be something like, “You Christians say you love and care for one another, but it’s obvious you don’t — look at how you harm each other and are unloving toward one another; if you don’t care enough to help each other with spiritual struggles, then don’t talk to me about the gospel. The gospel apparently is worthless...”
 - ✓ That kind of statement reflects the meaning of the word *evil*, which is often translated “blaspheme.”
 - ✓ By not loving enough to give up liberties, we entice people to blaspheme the gospel and Christ.
- There is something so much more important at stake than just what I want and what I want to do. The reputation of the gospel is at stake when we exercise our liberties.
- Can we make a commitment that we are willing to give up our freedoms not only for the sake of caring well for (loving!) our brothers, but also so that the name of Christ and the gospel is well-represented?

4. Do Not Let Your Use of Liberty Provoke You to Forget GOSPEL PURPOSES (vv. 17-18)

- The end of the gospel is to get us to God — and entrance into His *kingdom*.
 - ✓ The word *kingdom* often refers to the literal millennial kingdom when Christ will rule from Jerusalem, as the fulfillment of the covenant with David.
 - ✓ Here, it probably is more general than that — the kingdom is to identify us with Christ and God. The kingdom is about being a follower of Christ and submitting to Him as our Lord.
 - ✓ That’s the purpose of the gospel.
- What is life like in that Kingdom?
 - ✓ Kingdom living is not about *eating and drinking*. The goal of being a follower of Jesus is not “what do I get to do?” The goal is not gaining personal freedoms and “rights.”
 - ✓ Kingdom living *is* about *righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*. The goal of being a follower of Christ is to be transformed into the likeness of Christ by the Spirit (e.g., Gal. 5:22-23).
 - ✓ Kingdom living is about my transformation (not my rights) and about my relationship with other believers, with a particular result (v. 18).

- When we *serve Christ...in this way* (by being righteous, peaceable...w/ others), there are two results:
 - ✓ We are **acceptable to God**. He “approves” and is pleased by our actions (8:4; 2 Cor. 5:9).
 - ✓ We are **approved by men**. Rather than blaspheming (v. 16), others outside the church look at the way we relate to one another and say, “that’s the way the church should be” and they are drawn to believe in Christ.
 - ✓ This verse is a reminder that we need to think about what others think about what we do — our actions and our attitudes do matter to God and we should think about what others think (both the weak and the unbelieving). We don’t ever want to be an impediment to others trusting Christ or following Christ.

CONCLUSION:

We have a propensity for ignoring and even laughing at warning labels because we don’t believe we really are at risk and we think that even if we are at risk that the danger is minimal.

Paul has put the Romans and us on high alert about misusing our liberties. He has told us that if we aren’t careful with the use of our liberties, there are (at least) three harmful outcomes:

- ✓ Those whose consciences are weak will be led to sin against their consciences
- ✓ We will be proven to be unloving
- ✓ The gospel and Christ our Savior will be mocked

The implications of how we use our liberties is significant. So let’s go back to the theme of this message and series: let us determine to use our liberties only as much as it allows us to preserve the unity of the church.

BENEDICTION: Prayer of gratitude for morning and for the food and fellowship