

## Repetition is Good for the Soul Romans 14:20-23

We are in this fascinating section about the use of our personal liberty and freedom that we have in Christ, and how it affects those who are in the household of faith. Paul has said that if something causes my brother or sister to stumble, he will stay away from it even if it is not something that God forbids. If meat is sacrificed to idols and someone might be led off into sin then don't do it. If someone is a recent convert to Judaism and the blood is still in the meat and he looks that he is going to dishonour God if he eats, don't set a stumbling block before him.

And one of the things that we see in the Word of God many times is repetition. And as we come to this last paragraph in chapter 14 there is nothing new that Paul says. You look at every verse and it has been said and emphasized through this chapter. So why the repetition? Why not go on to the closing thoughts of this letter or some other subject? And the reason why is when something is important we repeat what has been said. When truths are hard for people to get into their minds and hearts we repeat and go over the principles and the instructions and the commands. We realize this in parenting. You do not have to give commands and instructions to your children once. "Be nice to your siblings." There we said it once and never have to say it again. No, we have to repeat it. We have to say it again and again. Why? Because they do not get the message.

And in a day and age where my rights and freedoms and personal happiness are so often at the forefront of my thoughts and passions, this passage that thinks of others before myself and is involved in the lives of my fellow believers for the glory of Christ is so foreign. It needs to be repeated. Life is about me, and about what I want. People look for a church not as being active but more as a consumer - what it can do for me. It is all about me. Many people come out to church as a spectator and not as a participant. Christianity is a way of life rather than a living relationship with Christ, and therefore there is very little relationship or regard for others. They attend Sunday, and might give a little and might serve once and a while in a very short term basis. Why? Life is about about me and my pleasures, and we do not want anything getting in the way. I want my freedoms and I stay away from anything that would limit them. The church, people and even God revolve around me. And many will hear what I have just said but it does not go in or compute that might be them. They do not the self orientation of their lives.

That is why Paul repeats because in verse 19 he gives an amazing short hand statement of how we are to live as believers in the here and now. Look at what he says, **"So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."** Pursue is something that you run after, a goal and purpose for your life. And ask yourself: what is my purpose for life? What is my ultimate goal? What am I pursuing and running after. If someone truly examined my life what conclusion would they come to as far as my goal and purpose of being right here and now? Paul says that he has two goals. The first is **"makes for peace."** And he is talking about your life in the church, how you live with others and function with others. Paul is making an assumption that you are active with the members, and that you are involved in their lives. And you want most of all to foster unity and peace in the church of Jesus Christ. You look at some individuals and

wherever they go, and they have been to many churches, there is division and discord, and they are never to blame but they are in the midst of this. To seek to live at peace takes much humility. It takes work and effort and restraint. Unity in the church of Christ is such a high goal.

But why is it so important? And we could say because we want to be a unified body of believers that shows our love for Christ. But Paul has another way we show that love. Notice it is **“for mutual upbuilding.”** The word that is used in some translations is edify. And it has the meaning of construction, building something. And the question is: what are we building? You cannot build unless you know what you are building. And Paul in Ephesians 4 tells us that he has given gifted teachers in the church for this very purpose. He says in Ephesians 4:12-13, **“to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”** The whole goal is maturity, the full measure or the full likeness of Jesus Christ. That is your life’s purpose and duty. It is the work of God for the glory of God for the good of his people. But again, is this your purpose? Is this why we came out this morning? Did we come out to get or give, to be a spectator to take in or a participant? Because he says for mutual edification or building up. Not only are others built up but we are built up. The ones that many times have the greatest benefit by God’s grace of the church of Christ are those who are the most active.

Paul has been stressing through this section the need of unity and the spiritual welfare of others over our pleasure and liberty. Now he needs to repeat that. Our problem is that we are so self-focussed and demanding. We do not even know it. What would the church look like, how great the growth of others if every single member were committed to these two purposes outlined in this verse in living for the glory of Christ? And now we come to the necessary repetition in verses 20-23. And I want us to see two things this morning, and both are warnings. May God give us the grace of loving others, and humility to live for his purposes this morning.

1. The first warning is don’t tear down what God is building. Vv. 20-21.

It is amazing when we want to do something or want to engage in something we never ask: how is this going to be perceived by others? We can have a “get over it” kind of attitude. And there are things that we do and don’t do because we realize those outside of Christ might not understand. But how much greater an offence when we cause another brother or sister to stumble in their faith. We have special services every Christmas Eve and every Good Friday. Now why do we have those special services? I know some might struggle if we do not. Every good Christian goes to church on Christmas Eve and on Good Friday. They know that their salvation is not dependant upon it, but if they did not go, or if the church did not have a service, they would feel that they are sinning against God, or that they are not honouring him as they should.

God has said not to esteem one day above another and that there are no holy days. All days are holy in his sight. So why do we have special services on these certain days? One reason is we want believers and unbelievers to know that the birth of Christ and the death and resurrection of Christ are significant and worthy to be

remembered and be celebrated. Another, it is a great reminder to us of these cherished truths of what God has done in Christ. It is a wonderful opportunity to make known Jesus Christ. But another reason is that some would struggle with not having a service on those certain days. They would not be judgmental and argumentative about it, but they would struggle. It does not mean that they are weak or immature, but that their conscience would be stricken in some way. So what do we do? We have services. We celebrate all that Christ is for us. Whether we see the need or not, we all come out and celebrate together Christ's good and grace in our lives. We do not claim our liberty or use it in such a way to cause others to stumble. In fact, it becomes an opportunity to build up one another and be a witness in our community. And the only reason we have these special services is not just for the weak because we all need the constant reminder of these blessed truths. Life is not about you.

And this is Paul's whole point here. Look at what he says in verse 20, **“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.”** Again, how will my actions affect others? How will exercising my liberty in a certain areas cause others to think about Christ? And remember, he is not saying: how will my sinful activities affect others, but other activities that are legitimate? And our momentary joys and liberties and freedoms are just that. They are momentary. And if we are truly amazed at the grace and glory of God in our lives, then it will cause us to love others and want the highest in their lives. Love sacrifices. Here, I give up some momentary pleasure like eating meat for the welfare of my brother. Everything is clean. But if my doing that activity causes my children to stumble or my spouse to stumble or offends another brother or sister in Christ then it is wrong, no matter if there is no chapter and verse in the Bible that says it is wrong I will give it up.

We take this so lightly. But look at the seriousness of this sin, because he says when you are not thinking about others the outcome is **“destroy the work of God.”** In the last verse he talks about doing everything to build up others. In other words to participate in the work of God. Here someone because of arrogance and pride is destroying the very work that God seeks his people to be involved in. It is called “the work of God.” The possessive here is that this is none other than God's work or God's production. Ephesians 2:10, **“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”** We often do not consider how serious a sin this is because again, we are not doing anything “technically wrong.” Listen to what MacArthur writes about this, **“We would consider it an appalling crime for someone to deface a Rembrandt painting, to shatter a sculpture by Michelangelo, or to smash a Stradivarius violin. How infinitely worse it is to tear down a work of God, a man ‘for whom Christ died.’”**

Look at verse 21, **“It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.”** So my life should be consumed with not only building up others a bit being careful not to deconstruct or destroy what God is building. Think of what is going on here. The strong are exerting pressure on the weak to be like them, and to engage in the activity that their conscience really struggles with. It is good for me not to eat meat or drink wine. And the application is I do not want my brother to stumble. Now the wine here is somehow ceremonial. It is not talking about

just a casual or social drink. But the moment you put any restriction, people get really tense. You have touched their shibboleth. They legalistically want chapter and verse. Show me where it says I cannot do this or do that. And here is the amazing aspect, and we all know this: Christians in local churches are more divided than ever. And they are more divided over secondary issues, and many of these secondary issues deal with personal liberties. And the one that is most familiar is wearing a mask or not. Whatever camp you are in you want to require everyone else to bow to your will. And we might even turn to chapter 14 and say, stop judging me at the same time judging others. In 1Cor. 12 the Corinthians were fighting over wanting the most showing gifts. Gifts that are public show our importance. But listen to the way chapter 12 ends, "But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way" Paul wants to show them a better way rather than coveting gifts so I could be above others. And then we have chapter 13. Does anyone know what the topic of chapter 13 is? Love. Listen to Paul's description of love, and ask in claiming your rights over some who has a different opinion if this describes your attitudes and words about that other person: "1 Corinthians 13:4-7, "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Tearing down others is never loving. Standing against others who differ is not loving as Christ loves. Demanding that it is my way or the highway about these kind of issues is more. Listen and hear God's warning: don't tear down what he is doing through the gospel for his eternal glory.

## 2. Don't flaunt your liberty. Vv. 22-23.

The point that Paul makes here is that not only do we tear down others when we insist on our own way and own pleasures and own freedoms, but also it has a devastating affect on our relationship with God. Others are not the only ones affected by our lack of compassion and care for the struggles and weaknesses of others, but we ourselves are affected in our relationship with God. We lose that divine perspective about what God is seeking to do in us and in others. Temporary things become primary. The things of this life take on ultimate importance. We demand that we have them no matter who gets hurt. My rights are more important than the transformation process that is to be going on in and through me. When we lovelessly exercise our freedoms at the expense of others, you have to know that there is something desperately wrong in your life. If Jesus Christ said that you will know that you are my disciples by your love for one another, and I show my lack of love through my words and actions then I have to know that my relationship with God is being hindered, how his work in me is really being derailed by my lack of willingness to love God enough to cause me to love and sacrifice for others.

Look at what he says here in verse 22, "**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.**" Now if this verse was in isolation by itself it would be a very tough verse to translate. Because he says, "**The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.**" But I thought we were to speak of our faith and share our

faith? And that is what you thought, you thought right. What Paul means here by “faith” is “conviction.” And the conviction would be that all meat is clean. So you have that pork steak before you at home, and again this is not done in public with a whole bunch of new Jewish converts. Between yourself and God. He says that this is a good conviction. You have no reason to feel guilty at home away from those who could stumble to enjoy that good and legitimate pleasures that God has given us. You can imagine the pride and arrogance if you said all food is clean and you brought food offered to idols or pork to the church potluck knowing that people will struggle. Don’t flaunt your liberty. Realize that all believers are not where you are. Bring turkey or peanut butter or something else. Don’t be arrogant. Think of the struggles of others. We might try to appease our minds that we are trying to help others but you are working against the very purposes of verse 19. You are creating disunity and yearning down what God has built. And this has more to do with your sin and immaturity before God than it does with the immaturity of others.

Now look at how he brings this chapter to a close in verse 23, **“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.”** Here is the problem. Here is what we want to be mindful of all the time because we really do love or want to love others. And that is individuals have struggles. They are different from me. I noticed during the pandemic. For some of you, the lockdown was one of the toughest time in your life. Even though there were opportunities to hear the word and participate in a virtual study on Wednesday night, it was really difficult and you felt as you were dying or stagnant as a believer. For others it was a great spiritual refreshment. They could not relate to those who were struggling. Some of you met your spouse and children again that through the busyness of life had been absent. Some of you spent time contemplating and reading, or some of you really became inventive of how to minister to others. When you think back, all of us have different thoughts and different conclusions. And here is my point: we are all different. We have the same faith, but often because of our weaknesses or peculiar background or make-up, somethings that might even be legitimate, and we might know it in our heads, but think: if I go down this road then I will end up sinning against God.

And Paul here uses “faith” the same way he did in the previous verse. It has the meaning of convictions. When you engage in activities even if you know at some level it is legitimate but you have the conviction that you are or this will lead you to sin against God, then it is sin to do that activity - to eat that meat or drink that wine.

So ask yourself: with the goals that Paul has of unity and peace, and building up others in Christ, which creates an other-centredness in us, am I truly living with my brothers and sisters in Christ in a loving and understanding way, considering their weaknesses and struggles? Or, am I filled with arrogance and pride so much so that if no one can give me chapter and verse about a certain activity, food, or drink that I don’t care who has a problem with it or not, I am going to engage in it?

You see all of us want lists. We claim others as legalist because they cannot have a glass of wine or think it is wrong. And if you challenge them on whether it is right or wise. They will demand that you show chapter and verse. Now who is the legalist? But you say, that the spirit of our faith and the New Testament is to care and love one another, and never give occasion for others to fall. This is not legalism. A glass

of wine brings no one closer or further away from the Lord. But it is the spirit that it is done in or not done. If I never have a glass of wine in my life, am I any worse off? Have I really missed out on some great pleasure? Yes, I have the liberty. But is it necessary to exercise that liberty and especially flaunt it before others? It is hard to believe in our me-centred and pleasure-centred Christianity that these are difficult and hard concepts for us, but they are. Look at verse 19 as we close and let this help you make the decision about what we do, **“So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”** God repeats over and over what is important. Seek the spiritual welfare of your brothers and sisters. Seek peace and seek to build them up in Christ.