

Sermon Title: True Freedom is Limited
Biblical Text: Romans 14:13-15
Teaching Series: Justified by Love
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Romans 14:13-15

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.

We're back in Romans after a brief break for Easter. And in May we'll take a break as well. Our three other elders—Juan, Aaron, and Derec—will be sharing from Scripture passages that have been impactful for them recently. I know that will be incredibly fruitful. Don't miss it.

In Romans we left off with Paul talking about judgment. He tackles the subject under the larger theme of living lives of love. You see, when we are no longer being conformed to this world but transformed by the renewal of our minds, we love each other, we don't judge each other. Love is supposed to rule the way we think about each other, and our ideas. Today we'll learn that love also should guide

how we behave. While the first portion of the chapter is dedicated to thinking well of each others, especially when we differ on secondary matters of conscience, this portion of the text invites us to be mindful of how our behaviors impacts the people we're called to love. In other words, just because we can do something does not mean we should do something.

That's what I'd like to talk about today. I want to talk about limits. We don't like limits, do we? I know I don't. Yet, limits are all around us. We're limited by our bodies. We're limited by hours in the day and days in a week. We're limited by our resources. We're limited by our social, vocational, and emotional capacities. This is one reason writer Andy Crouch thinks technology is so alluring to us; it promises us a kind of superpower to overcome these temporal and physical limits (*The Life We're Looking For*). From cars to social media, technology promises a life without limits. But, *what if limits are good? What if they're healthy? What if limits are actually freeing?* Pastor David Tripp explains that limits are part of God's good design. He writes in his book, *Lead*, "***Everyone and everything has been designed by God with limits, and it never works, never results in anything good, to attempt to live, minister, and lead outside the boundaries of the limits God has set***" (73). This is deeply counterintuitive and contrary to the way many of us think and the way we learn to value and navigate our lives. But what Paul does in these three verses though is help us see the beauty of limitations. In fact, he's going to show us, paradoxically, how true freedom is always limited.

Here's how we'll organize our time together ...

- Freedom is limited by our *family*.
- Freedom is limited by our *conscience*.
- Freedom is limited by our *love*.

[Prayer]

Movement 1: Freedom is Limited by Our Family (v.13, Leviticus 10:10-11, Acts 10:13,15)

In context, Paul's been talking about the freedom we have in Christian community to disagree and see secondary issues differently. Remember, the church in Rome was diverse like ours here in Chicago. In fact, this was unique in history because as the Roman Empire expanded its borders, national borders began to disappear. Some people were born in Italy. Others had only recently moved to the area from all over Europe and Africa. Some grew up worshipping Greek gods and goddesses. Others grew up worshipping the God of the Bible. They were rich and poor; men and women; day laborers and business people. Yet, one thing they shared was a spiritual life that had become enmeshed with their cultural values. And so it was hard for them and others to distinguish between traditions and truths. Which led to judgment. That always leads to judgment. And it also led church members to behave in ways that wittingly or unwittingly hurt each other. After all, this eclectic bunch was now at the same worship gatherings, same bbq's, same bible studies, and they supposed to act like a family.

That's the first limit Paul addresses. Our freedom is limited by our family. Notice v.13, ***Read Romans 14:13 ... 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.*** Now there's a play on words here which we miss in English, but it would have been clear to Paul's first readers. You see, the word 'decide' there is the same word for 'judge' ... ***krino***. The best way to convey it I think is something like: don't make determinations on each other, rather determine to take care of each other. We should refuse to do anything that will cause our brothers or sisters harm.

You see? Our freedom to do something is limited by our membership within a family. We do not act on our own. We act as members of a family. We don't just think about our opportunity and ability to do something, we think about its effect on the people we do life with, the people we identify with. *Can you even image if we limited ourselves based upon what was best for our church family?*

As a reminder, the particular matter Paul has in mind is eating meat. You see, in Ancient Israel certain animals were determined to be clean and others unclean. Much of the book of Leviticus is dedicated to laying out these ceremonial laws about being clean (or holy) and unclean (or unholy). God commands Moses' brother Aaron about all this in Leviticus 10, ***Read Leviticus 10:10-11 ... "You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them by Moses."*** Suffice to say, eating or even touching what was

unclean made you unclear or unholy. Things like rabbits, pigs, and camel are all listed in Leviticus as unclean (see Leviticus 11:4,6,7). And so the people of God didn't eat these things and went through ceremonial cleansing even if they touched something they shouldn't. Now, these animals weren't evil. That's not what the law is saying. Rather the Lord was teaching his people about obedience and shaping them through limits. Reverend Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains, "*the Levitical law was not based on the nature of things in and of themselves, but God had determined and chosen to make this distinction in order to that he might discipline and govern his people*" (Romans, 157). The law shaped God's people through limits, for their well-being and God's glory.

However, in the wake of Jesus' death and resurrection the Levitical purification system is rendered unnecessary. Why? Because Jesus makes us clean. Peter actually has a vision about this in Acts. In fact, he has the vision three times. In it God explains to him and us that we are no longer limited in what we are allowed to eat. Peter sees a sheet come down from heaven full of animals and reptiles and birds (Acts 10:12). And then he hears a voice, ***Read Acts 10:13,15 ... "Rise, Peter; kill and eat What God has made clean, do not call common."*** God calls all animals clean. Nothing is common or unclean.

This is the complexity which puzzles and divides the Christians in Rome. Many Jewish Christians are still unlearning these dietary restrictions of their childhood and ancestry. While many non-Jewish Christians find dietary restrictions unnecessary, if not silly. Therefore some members in the church had a sense of

moral freedom that others don't. And so they have a choice to make. Do they eat meat in front of our their Jewish brothers and sisters? Do we? What responsibility do we have in matters of conscience when others disagree? Well Paul says, ***Read Romans 14:13 ... decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.*** Biblically a “stumbling block” is a behavior or attitude which causes someone to sin. So Paul is not asking us to refrain from anything that makes someone uncomfortable. He's talking about doing something that knowingly will cause another person to betray their conscience.

We are no longer limited by the law we are still limited. True freedom is limited by family. What's this look like for our family? Some of us feel the freedom to curse ... to drink ... yes, to eat meat ... to get tattoos ... to watch certain movies ... and listen to certain types of music. The Scriptures grant Christian liberty in these and many other areas. Yet, your freedom is not a license to stop thinking about your family. In fact, if you're a Christian, and still do as you please ... do what you're feel free to do ... you are still trapped. Trapped to selfishness; bound by isolation and individuality and separation and greed and fear. Doing whatever you want is not real freedom. True freedom is limited. It's limited by family. Because when we are limited by the needs of our brothers and sisters, we are free to flourish, thrive, and become a community which is impossible to become in isolation.

Movement 2: Freedom is Limited by Our Conscience (v.14)

The reason being mindful of our family is so important is because much of morality is a matter of conscience. In other words, you and I can see or experience

the same thing and walk away with very different spiritual experiences. And when someone watches another person enjoying a freedom, it may cause them to betray their conscience or conviction. It may cause them to sin. That's where Paul goes next. *Read Romans 14:14 ... 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.*

Paul goes deeper into his understanding of freedom. Notice he says he knows and he is persuaded. This communicates a kind of personal thoughtfulness and process. To be a Christian is not to give over your mind to group think and mindless tradition. Christians are supposed to think, we've discussed this recently. And what he's been convinced of is that nothing is unclean on it's own. Rather whether or not something is clean or unclean is a matter of personal conscience. And depending on how the Spirit guides our conscience we are bound to that conviction. Therefore, true freedom is limited by our conscience.

Now before we press on, we should be clear that sin is often a matter of the law. Regardless of our disposition, God's moral law still matters. A brief aside might be helpful ...

Sixteenth century French theologian John Calvin taught that the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) had three sets of laws: civil, ceremonial, and moral laws (Institutes). Civil laws focused on bringing order and flourishing to society under a theocracy. Ceremonial laws were about purification in atonement and worship. Moral laws were about living in accordance with God's heart and character. Because we no longer live in a theocracy, the civil laws are no longer in force.

Because of the death of Christ, the ceremonial laws have been fulfilled. But the moral laws of God remain in force. Of course obeying these laws do not save us. Rather because we've been saved and transformed by Jesus we learn to obey moral law out of love.

Some may call Christian's hypocritical because we obey some laws and not others. For instance, we no longer universally abstain from shell fish, but still teach what some would consider an archaic sexual ethic, reserving sexual union for heterosexual marriage. Well, those are two very different sets of laws. One ceremonial. The other moral. Therefore our relationship to those laws are different.

You see, Paul knows the Levitical or ceremonial law has been fulfilled in Christ, so what was once a matter of the law is now a matter of the heart. I remember wrestling with this as a kid. I don't recall all the circumstances, but I do remember asking my dad if it was a sin to tell him something I thought was accurate if it ended up being untrue. He wisely told me it was a matter of the heart. In other words, my words were not clean or unclean in and of themselves. They were words. What mattered was what I was thinking, what I was believing. What mattered was what was going on in my motivations and in my heart. Tracking with me?

Paul says he knows something. He's been persuaded in his conscience. However, this verse and this principle is not about Paul. It's about the fact that as free as Paul might be ... as convinced as he might be ... and settle in his heart as he might be

that something is not sinful, his brother or sister may be just as convinced and settled that something is sinful. And their freedom, like ours, is limited by their conscience. They can't do it. They can't eat meat. As free as you feel to watch that movie or eat that meal or enjoy that drink, they feel just as convicted of it's sinfulness. And Paul's saying, ***Read Romans 14:14b ... it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.*** We're not talking about being flippant with the moral law. We're talking about living within the limits of conscience with respect to what was civil and ceremonial ... or, if you please, cultural.

Similar to the previous limitation, you might think to yourself, well I'm my own person someone else's conscience has nothing to do with me. I'm going to enjoy what I enjoy, when I enjoy it. Well, my friend, then you are still in bondage. That's not true freedom. You are actually bound to tribalism and only being in united with people who are culturally and politically and ideologically identical to you. True freedom always is limited to conscience and mindful of the conscience of others.

Movement 3: Freedom is Limited by Our Love (v.15, Ephesians 5:25-33, 1 Corinthians 7:8 Matthew 11:28-30)

Paul adds a third limitation now. It's perhaps his most broad. In fact, it undergirds every other limitations of freedom. The thing that ultimately compels us to deny ourselves a freedom we could otherwise enjoy is love. Love is the ultimate limit that leads to freedom. Look how he continues, ***Read Romans 14:15 ... 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. Paul says if you are not mindful and considerate of your brother, in fact if you don't change the way you live and act around your weaker family members, you are no longer walking in love. Why? Because true freedom is limited by love most of all.

This is universally true, though we often miss the implications. What is that we say in a wedding ceremony? ... "forsaking all others." That is, in their vows a couple is choosing to limit themselves to a single partner out of love for the other. You see, we know that true love limits itself. Of course, we don't really view marriage as very freeing, do we? It seems like the opposite of freedom. Many of us see singleness as freedom and marriage as a kind of bondage or settling down. We even pejoratively call marriage things like 'the ball and chain.' Yet, when we give ourselves in marriage we become something new. The Scriptures speak of two becoming one. That is, we we're bound to marriage we're free to become something new. In Ephesians Paul explains that something new points to something miraculous, *Read Ephesians 5:32 ... This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.* When we are bound in marriage we're free to become a living metaphor of the gospel.

This truism isn't relegated to marriage. Singleness bears out the same ethic in a different way. In fact, Christianity was the only worldview in the ancient world which saw singleness as a fulfilling season or life-long status. When Paul talks about singleness when writing the Corinthians, *Read 1 Corinthians 7:8 ... To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I*

am. What Paul is saying is that, contrary to the cultural value, you can live a deeply fulfilling, faithful, and loving life without being married. In the ancient world you were valued based upon the honor and worth of your family. And if you did not marry, your honor and worth was compromised. But Paul is saying, if you're single don't be too eager to change your status. Don't think the good life is waiting to happen only after you get marriage. You see, the limitations of singleness also express themselves in love and freedom. In our singleness we are limiting ourselves certain romantic liberties which others don't ... out of love for our community and friendship ... out of love for a future spouse ... out of love for the Lord and ourselves. In denying ourselves liberty, we're free in singleness to enjoy peace of mind, holiness, purposefulness, mission, ... we are free to become something new. When we're limited by love in singleness, we experience true freedom, just as we do in marriage.

Along with these more intimate expressions, Paul's telling us this ought to be the fundamental expression of Christians community. Out of love for those around us, we limit our freedoms. In doing so we not only walk in love, but embody the gospel. Notice, he says when we walk in love we don't destroy, "*the one for whom Christ died.*" You see? This is fundamental to Christian community because this is fundamental to Christ. Christ limited himself out of love for us. The Son of God is the one who was eternally without limits. He was the limitless God of the universes. He was the most free being who ever was. And yet in his freedom he embraced limits. Limits on his divinity. Limits on his nature. Limits on his experiences. He became part of a human family and was limited by his conscience

and by his love for his Father and for us. The only limitless being embraced limits to free us from the bondage of sin and death. But not to give us limitless powers and a completely autonomous life. Rather ironically, he frees us to give us a new kind of bondage. Of course, this is deeply counterintuitive and counterculture.

Jesus explains this to his disciples in Matthew 11. He says, ***Read Matthew 11:28-30 ... Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*** This is incredible. Notice he invites the weary to come to him. He promises rest. But then he says take my yoke upon you. That's odd. A yoke was a wooden harness fitted for a beast of burden to plow a field. In other words, Jesus is saying trade one burden, one limitation, one bondage, for another. Why is this hopeful? Well, in Jesus' day it was very uncommon for a yoke to be fitted on a single animal. And Jesus oddly calls this, my yoke. In other words, Jesus gets in the yoke with us. Jesus carries the burden, the limitation, the bondage with you. We are freed to be bound to Christ, and this new limitation brings us true freedom. Unlike the back breaking freedoms of this life, Jesus' freedom with its limitation of family, conscience, and love, his freedom will give you life ... his limits give you true freedom.

Twentieth century author, Elton Trueblood explains that, ***“We have not advanced very far in our spiritual lives if we have not encountered the basic paradox of freedom, to the effect that we are most free when we are bound.”*** He goes on to

say that what matters though is the character of our binding. Not just any limits will do. The right limits are freeing. The wrong limits are crushing. What Jesus is saying in Matthew and Paul in Romans is that every other limitation will ultimately destroy you. But the limitations of Christ free you and free us as a church family because they are fit for our design. You and I were made to be part of a family. You and I were made to be connected, mind, heart, and behavior. You and I were meant to share in sacrificial love. Only the limits Jesus puts on your life are made for you. They are made to enable us to flourish and thrive as his people. So, allow his limits to constrict your life, and see how free you become.