FREEDOM IN CHRIST

Romans 14:1-23
Key Verse 14:8

“If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord”

In last week’s passage, we learned that we have been given the precious gift of authority as God’s servants in this generation. Those who recognize authority as God’s gift can use it as a source of encouragement for everyone to live according to God’s law of love. But those who reject God’s gift of authority come under a spirit of rebellion and are living in the darkness of selfishness and sin. They will be exposed in the day of judgment. So we must continually hear Paul’s encouragement in 13:12, “The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.” The armor of light is the shield of God’s grace and truth that is ours through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. In today’s passage, Paul talks about eating and drinking. It seems to be a welcome respite from the spiritual battle that Paul has been calling us to join. But wait! No, even in these disputable matters of what to eat and what to drink, there is a spiritual battle that we must fight. Let us learn what is the spiritual battle involved in our choices of what to eat and drink!

I. Standing as God’s servant

First, Weak and strong faith (1-4). Look at verses 1 and 2. “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.” In these verses, Paul addresses an important issue among Christians. For a Christian, there are issues that are of life and death importance. Unless we repent and believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ, we will be condemned. Unless we repent of our self-righteousness, and receive the righteousness from God that is by faith, we will be condemned. Unless we believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and are clothed in the Lord Jesus Christ, we will be
condemned. In these matters, there is no middle ground, and there cannot be any compromise. Jesus' words, “Things that cause people to sin are bound to come. But woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin,” are for those who promote compromise with regard to grace and the gospel. Strangely however, this absolute attitude toward the grace of Jesus Christ, and toward our responsibility as gospel workers is often lacking among Christians. There is such a casual attitude among modern Christians regarding the realities of God's grace. At the same time, these same Christians are intensely interested in saying something about what others are eating, drinking or wearing, when in fact, these issues are all disputable matters. Paul draws a distinction between weak faith and strong faith. Weak faith is bound up in disputes over disputable matters. Strong faith is faith that takes its stand in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul does not pull any punches or make any excuses for those who have weak faith. Weak faith is weak faith. Where our faith is weak, we should repent and grow in strong faith that cannot be shaken. May God help each one of us to have strong faith that stands firmly on the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and is not shaken by arguments over disputable matters!

However, Paul does not thereby make strong faith a bragging point among Christians. Why not? If in fact strong faith is to be desired, shouldn’t those who have it be honored, and those who don’t be reminded of this fact, so that they might grow? If you asked yourself this question, it shows that you have not digested Romans Bible study fully. Romans 3:27-8 says, “Where then is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.” Or as Paul boldly says in Galatians 5:6, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” To boast of being able to eat meat, or to boast of restraining oneself from eating meat is of no value in either case. Look at verses 3 and 4. “The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God
has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he will stand or fall. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.” If we want to make ourselves out to be great because of our “freedom” to do something that others can’t, or because of our “restraint” in not doing something that we feel others shouldn’t, we are wasting our time. More than that, our “freedom” in what to eat or what to wear means nothing if we don’t use our freedom in a way that pleases our Master, Jesus. Don’t be so sure that you are really free in Christ. Those who are really free in Christ do what pleases Christ first, ahead of themselves. The real problem is not food or drink, but that we are still bound by our selfishness and so prevented from serving Christ and others in love. So, there is nothing to boast about before God. Rather, we can have confidence to stand in his service only because of God’s continuing grace to us as sinners.

Second, Living to God (5-8). Let’s read together verses 5-6. “One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.” In these verses, Paul expresses in a nutshell our freedom as Christians. Because each of us lives before God and must answer to our own consciences, we do not have to answer to anyone else. If we are convinced in our own minds, through prayer and Bible study, that the best time to pray is at 4 PM instead of 4 AM, then by all means, we should pray at that time. If we are convinced that eating eggs or drinking coffee promotes unhealthy levels of fat and hinders the working of the Holy Spirit, then by all means, we should not eat eggs or drink coffee. And we should do so with a thankful mind, knowing that God will accept what we offer to him, if it is offered to him in faith. This seems like a small thing. But in the history of mankind, it is not a small matter at all.

Our Christian ancestors who came over to America from the shores of Europe were seeking to practice this very kind of freedom of conscience. They studied the Bible diligently for themselves, until they were convinced in their own minds how they should serve and worship
God. Their sincere struggle to serve God with a clean and clear conscience is a precious example and light for all generations of American young people. Of course, in this dark generation, many textbooks portray the early American Christians as stiff and having no freedom at all. They are sadly mistaken. More objective observers could understand that it was this very freedom of conscience that was the driving force for American greatness. Alexis de Tocqueville was a French observer who came to America in the 1800’s, when his own country was suffering from all kinds of religious divisions. It was amazing to him to see Christianity in America that was in the service of freedom, rather than the parochial Christianity of old Europe which suppressed men in the name of doctrinal purity. It was in fact unheard of. It is a shame on the history of Christianity that in fact this freedom has been hidden from men by those who feared it. Nevertheless, as long as there is the word of God, and there is the grace and salvation that are ours by faith, then this freedom is waiting to be discovered and fully used by those who are ready to live to God. Albert Schweitzer was a young medical student in Germany at the turn of the 20th century. He could have enjoyed a nice, middle class life in Germany. But he accepted one word of God from John 3:16, and decided to go to the Lambarene, Congo as a medical missionary for African people. He could not enjoy the comforts and luxury of Germany, and was hard pressed by his daily labor to serve the poor and sick under his care. But he wrote in his diary (I’m paraphrasing here), “I am free indeed, because I am free to meditate on God’s word, free to serve God’s sheep, free to serve him as he calls me to do.” Look at verses 7 and 8. “For none of us lives to himself alone, and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to God; and if we die, we die to God. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.” When we live with the basic creation faith that we were made to live to God, we can enjoy the full freedom of conscience in thought and in heart that is found only in Christ.

Third, Giving an account to God (9-12). The gift of freedom we have in Christ is indeed amazing and remarkable. For we have in him the freedom of action and the freedom of knowing and trusting in his salvation. But this freedom was purchased for us at a price. God did not leave us as slaves to cultural traditions, nationalistic boasting and
the darkness of our own sin. God sent his one and Only Son, Jesus Christ, down into this world as the Lamb of God who died for the sin of the world. Christ Jesus died, shedding his holy blood so that his holy blood might cleanse our sin-stained blood. Christ purchased freedom for our conscience by giving his own life as the ransom sacrifice that would cleanse our consciences and enable us to stand once more before God as his servants. We were sold as slaves to sin (Ro. 7:14b). But now, we have been purchased by God to be kings and priests in his coming kingdom. Revelation 5:9b says, “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” The one who purchased us is the one to whom we must answer for our lives. Look at verses 9-12. “For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. It is written: ‘As surely as I live,” says the Lord, “every knee shall bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.’” So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.” We have been given the gift of freedom by our God. It was a gift that cost the life of his beloved Son. But he freely gave it, so that we who believe and are in his service may in turn give our whole heart to doing his will. At the end of our life, we must give an account to God of how we have used this precious gift. At the end of our life, we must answer to God, “Sir, your mina has earned ten more.” Then God will graciously say to us, “Well done, my good and faithful servant! Because you have been trustworthy in a small matter, take charge of ten cities!” We must not be the ones to whom God says, “I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away.” (Luke 19:26).

II. Following the Law of Love

First, Put no obstacle in your brother’s way (13-18). Look at verse 13. “Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.” Immature Christians engage in self-righteous judgment of one another. But mature Christians who know the grace of our Lord
Jesus Christ are mindful how they use the freedom they have been given. They are also mindful of the authority they have in Christ to build others up. Therefore, they make a firm decision not to use their freedom in a way that harms others. Instead, they curb their freedom in Christ for the sake of others who are still growing and struggling to stand in the grace of Jesus alone. Paul himself sets the example for us in this. Look at verses 14-15. “As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.” There is the freedom of conscience. Then, there is the law of love. Those who know the grace of Christ Jesus are set free in their consciences so that they might live freely in obedience to God's law of love. Therefore, they curb their freedom in obedience to the law of love in order not to wound another's conscience. Look at verses 17 and 18. “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.” To insist on our freedom to act as we wish as a matter of course is to violate the law of love, for which we must answer to God. We must make up our minds as servants of Christ to please God by serving others ahead of ourselves.

Second, Make every effort to bring peace (19-21). Look at verse 19. “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” The key words in this verse are “make every effort.” It is natural for sinful human beings to insist on their freedoms and rights. When we feel that our freedoms or rights are being violated, we experience what we imagine is a righteous anger toward those who are violating them. On the other hand, it is quite difficult for us to place ourselves in the position of the one whose faith is weak, and whose conscience is being violated by our flamboyant use of personal freedom. In reality, we are blinded by our selfishness to see the fragility of others. The struggle to get out of our self-centered viewpoint, and to see others as God sees them is a life and death struggle with our sinful nature. But the one who can overcome himself and take to heart the struggles and trials of others is known as a
peacemaker. His reward in heaven will be great. Matthew 5:9 says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God.” In fact, each of us in our unbridled use of our human freedom makes others feel burdened and violated. We can be sure of it. When I married, I felt free in my conscience never to wear deodorant. I didn’t like its smell, and felt that if I washed once a day, that was enough. But my beautiful coworker didn’t agree, and felt burdened every time I came near. What should I have done? Should I have insisted on my freedom as a man in Christ? Of course not. I had to make every effort to deny my proud mind, and acknowledge that, free or not, I smelled bad enough to burden others. Indeed, we must be ashamed that in so many ways, we have burdened others unthinkingly, assuming that it was our human right to do so. We must make every effort so that in every way our actions and words lead to peace, and serve to mutually edify one another. Look at verses 20-21. “Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or to drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to stumble.”

Third, Using God's gift of freedom well (22-23). We have freedom, but we must restrain our human freedom in order to keep our conscience clear before God. Unless our conscience is clear we cannot act in faith, and we will fall into sin. Look at verse 23. “But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.” The man who understands that we have been given freedom in Christ so that we can act with a clear conscience before God and men is a man who pleases God and is approved by men.

May God bless us to use our freedom in Christ in order to have a clear conscience in our dealings with our brothers and sisters in Christ and with God's sheep that are under our care.