

Stumbling Blocks
Romans 14:13-15
ABC 6/12/11

All my life I've been told how dangerous it is to trip others. As a child my folks taught me it wasn't nice to trip people, however funny I might think it is. Most sports have rules against tripping. As in other areas of life, tripping is dangerous spiritually as well. Of course, our sermon this morning isn't against physically tripping other people in the church (although that's not a loving thing to do), but about not putting spiritual **stumbling blocks** in front of our fellow Christians. In Rom 14 Paul is talking about things that are neither commanded nor condemned. We're each left to decide. Ray Stedman tells the story of a church who got into an argument over whether they should have a Christmas tree at their Christmas program. Some thought it was fine; others thought it was a pagan practice. These 2 groups got so angry with each other they actually got into fist fights over it.¹ Unfortunately, that type of things happens more than we'd like to admit. It's when things that don't matter begin to matter that trouble breaks out between Christians & people get tripped up. **14:10-19** PRAY

Jesus has given us marvelous freedoms in life. We're not bound by the OT ceremonial & sacrificial laws. But more importantly, we're freed from the penalty of sin, from spiritual death, & eternal damnation. Apart from sin, we're free to enjoy all the good gifts God has graciously given us. But we aren't obligated to exercise every freedom we have. Our concern should always be for our fellow believers, including those who are still shackled in some way by the requirements, restrictions, & traditions under which their conscience keeps them. The issue for the mature Christian isn't whether or not he has freedom but how he should exercise or not exercise that freedom on the basis of how it affects those around him. But as Paul emphasizes, all responsibility doesn't fall on the stronger brother. Strong & weak believers both have a responsibility to love & accept each other & not to judge the other's convictions in these grey areas. All churches have dedicated, faithful believers whose consciences don't allow them to participate in certain things. When stronger believers, out of love for them, voluntarily restrict

¹ www.raystedman.org/new-testament/timothy/avoiding-congregational-gangrene

their own actions to conform to the stricter standards of the weaker believers, they build closer relationships with each other & the church as a whole is strengthened & unified. It's in that loving environment that the weaker believers are helped to become stronger believers & to better understand their freedoms in Christ. This is difficult because we know we have liberty through Christ & don't have to jump through a bunch of legalistic hoops. Nor do we have to follow someone else's rules or regulations. That means we can live as we please, right? No, not exactly. Our Christian liberty has 2 directions: It's vertical to the Lord. But the exercise of that liberty is horizontal, because it's seen by & affects others. Although we're free in Christ, the NT places several restraints on the use of that liberty. Obviously, our liberty isn't to be used to justify sin (1 Pt 2:16) & what Paul said of himself should be true of every believer: **All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything** (1 Cor 6:12). Later in the same letter, Paul adds, **All things are lawful, but not all things edify** (10:23). A habit or practice that may not be sinful in itself can easily become sinful by controlling the one who does it. What begins as an exercise of true freedom can turn into a form of bondage. This was a danger that Paul was determined to avoid. Paul's supreme purpose was to **do all things for the sake of the gospel** (1 Cor 9:23). Here in Rom 14 Paul continues his teaching about Christian liberty & the obligation we all have to accept each other without being judgmental or causing offense. **13**

1. Judge Not & Judge This (13) **Therefore** refers back to vs 1-12 where Paul reminds us that God alone is qualified & has the authority to judge the minds & hearts of His people & we'll all stand before His judgment seat & give account to Him (2 Cor 5:10). Because of this, we mustn't judge each other in these non-essential issues. It's the unloving attitude of uppity, better-than-you strong believers & the equally unloving attitude of how-dare-you-do-that, self-righteous weak believers by which we often judge each other. From Paul's day to ours, those kind of judgments have been the cause of disrespect, disharmony, & disunity in the church. Note that Paul uses the same Greek verb with 2 different nuances in vs 13. In the 1st phrase, **let us not judge one another**, the verb carries the idea of condemnation. But in the following phrase, **But rather determine**

(judge) **this**, the same verb is used, but here refers to making a decision. Paul's play on words demands we should never be judgmental of fellow Christians in these non-essential issues but instead should use sound judgment to help them.

2. Obstacle & Stumbling Block Therefore, we should **determine ... not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.**

Obstacle refers to something in the road that causes one to stumble. **Stumbling block** comes from the Greek word from which we get the word *scandal*. It literally refers to the triggering mechanism on a baited animal trap. We're to do our best not to innocently hinder our weaker brother's faith & we certainly aren't to intentionally hurt them as they grow in their faith. Paul is saying, *Don't do something that might spring a trap & catch an unsuspecting believer & then, bring about confusion & spiritual harm.* Our job is to clear debris from our fellow believer's paths.² To put an **obstacle** or **stumbling block** in your brother's way would be to do something in front of a weaker brother that for you is a matter of liberty in Christ, but it's not something he feels free to do. When he sees you doing it, he joins you, but it violates his conscience. Perhaps he goes along with you because he wants your approval, but he gets his eyes off of living to please the Lord. He sins because he isn't acting in faith (14:23). He's disobeying the Lord. This doesn't mean the entire church is limited by the conscience of the weakest believers in its midst. But you shouldn't flaunt your liberty in front of a weaker believer when you know it's an issue for him (1 Cor 10:23-30). Out of love for him, limit your liberty in his presence. As the Lord gives opportunity, you can teach him about true liberty in Christ. But don't do anything that would cause him to violate his conscience by following your example. We'll come back to this when we get to vs 15 but Paul adds a parenthetical statement in vs 14.

3. Conscience As far as non-sinful things are concerned, Paul says, **14a.**

If all non-sinful things are clean, if Christmas trees don't matter, then nothing is really at stake when you have a Christmas tree or choose not to have a Christmas tree. Right? In those areas where the Bible doesn't give a specific command to obey or principle to follow, we're free to

² Woodrow Krull, *Romans: Righteousness in Christ*, p 223

make our own decisions, guided by God's wisdom & the leading of the Holy Spirit. So what's the big deal? Just do what you want & don't worry about it! We can't because Paul adds, **14b**.

In other words, it's wrong to violate your conscience, even if your conscience isn't completely in line with the freedoms we have. Paul isn't stating his personal opinion about these things but was **convinced in the Lord Jesus**. What's that mean? Some say it was divine revelation, which easily could have been. Whatever the case, this conviction has penetrated Paul & he has no question about the truth of it. & we have it as God inspired Scripture. Paul says the strong Christian is right in his conviction that he's at liberty to enjoy anything God doesn't declare as sinful. The weak Christian is wrong in his understanding about some of those things, but he isn't wrong in the sense of being sinful, heretical, or immoral. He's wrong in the sense of not fully understanding his freedoms, which causes his conscience to be overly sensitive. For that reason, **to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean (14b)**. What's that mean? It means I don't eat Spam Musubi! Paul tells us what this means in vs 22-23 where he says the issue isn't merely food & cleanness, but faith & sin. Vs 22 says, **the faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God**. In other words, don't flaunt the faith that makes you free to do all things. Enjoy that freedom between you & God. But you don't need to show it off or push others toward your conviction. Again, the strong in faith don't have to default to the weaker's restrictions, but the strong believer shouldn't force the weaker brother to go against his conscience. For example, if a new Christian says he can't watch TV because he binge-watched *Breaking Bad* all at one sitting & has realized that's not the best use of his time, that doesn't mean you can't watch TV. It means you won't flaunt your liberty in front of him or force it on him. The point isn't that the weakest Christian sets the standard of behavior & restricts what everyone is allowed to do or not to do. That ends up in Pharisee-ism or legalism, not love. The point is, we respect the sensitive consciences of other Christians & don't force them to change by pressuring them. Paul continues: **Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves (22)**. This is the goal, don't be pressured into doing things your conscience condemns. This is what it means to put a **stumbling block** in someone's way. It's enticing them to do what their conscience condemns. The goal is to

have the joy of never doing what you believe is wrong. If you think something is unclean, for you it's unclean. So treat it as unclean until you rightly understand how Jesus has made it clean & free for you. Every Christian has weak spots in his conscience. Paul himself probably had some. He didn't claim to be perfect but he testified he did his **best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God & before men** (Acts 24:16). For various reasons, there are certain things we know are not sinful but we don't feel comfortable doing. When we feel discomfort about something, we should avoid it. If we violate our conscience, it will become more & more insensitive until it is **seared** (1 Tim 4:2). Conscience is God's doorkeeper to keep us away from harmful things. As we mature, conscience allows us to go more places & do more things because we'll have more spiritual strength & judgment. A small child isn't allowed to play with power tools, to roam the streets, or to drive a car. But those restrictions are gradually removed as they grow older & learn for themselves what's dangerous & what isn't. When you have toddlers you put covers on the outlets, latches on the doors, & gates by the stairs & scold them if they get near the stove or fireplace. Why? Because we need to protect our children & teach them. They're unable to understand the blessings & dangers of these things. We know that outlets, doors, stairs, & fires aren't bad in themselves. But until children understand the danger along with the benefit, we must protect them. When your kids are teenagers will you still be covering the outlets & telling them to stay away from the stove? No. You want them to tap into the freedoms these things have to offer. You want them to enjoy them having learned to respect them. You start protecting them but then you move to teaching & instructing them. In the same way, the young brother in Christ must be protected & instructed in the faith & taught about the freedom that is ours in Christ. They must understand that each person is free to make up their own mind as to what is right in these secondary issues. As they grow in knowledge & maturity the limits of their conscience are expanded. But we should never expand our actions & habits before our conscience permits it. & we should never encourage anyone else to do so either. Causing a brother to stumble is more than an offense against him; it's an offense against our Lord as well. Therefore, we should be eager to limit our liberty in order to help a fellow believer, a brother

whom we accept & love, & a soul for whom Christ died. In regard to doubtful things, our 1st concern shouldn't be to exercise our liberty but to care about the welfare of our fellow Christians. Even though we have the right to do anything we want in these areas as long as our conscience remains pure, we must be willing to restrict our rights & limit our liberty for the sake of the conscience of other Christians. You might say, *But that's not fair! I know the truth & there's nothing wrong with what I'm doing. I'm right!* You're correct, but Paul's tells us when it comes to grey matters, there's something more important than being right! Notice what Paul says in **Rom 14:15a**.

4. Walk According to Love Our liberty must always be tempered by love as we recognize that our attitudes & actions can harm others. The word **hurt** has the idea of grieving, as when a loved one dies. We're wrong to use our freedom in a way that causes anguish to another. Our desire & goal should be to abstain from doing anything that might cause another to stub their toe or trip & fall. What would you think of a person who rearranged the furniture in a blind person's house? As funny as my twisted sense of humor thinks this would be, even I know it's wrong. Paul gives the same warning in his 1st letter to Corinth, saying, **Take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak** (1 Cor 8:9). We should always be careful not to cause another Christian to trip & fall into sin because of something we do, even if we have the freedom to do it. Picture a man who's been raised & taught all his life that if he ever takes off his wedding ring he's breaking his marriage vows. This belief's been passed down in his family from generation to generation. To take it off would break his vows to his wife. Imagine he has a friend who's never heard of this belief. They get together to work on one of their cars, & as they get started, the friend takes off his wedding ring & puts it in his pocket so he doesn't lose a finger. Can you imagine the horror of this to the 1st man? In his friend's mind, he's not even thinking about what he did because to him it has no correlation with how much he loves his wife. This is a silly illustration, but problem areas vary greatly & are often silly, but the principle Paul gives never changes. Whether it's not removing a wedding ring, attending a movie or concert, playing cards, or whatever, it's similar to what the food laws were to newly-converted Jewish believers in

Paul's day. In their minds, to eat meat sacrificed to idols or declared unclean by the OT violated their vows to God. When they saw other Christians doing so, they were appalled, because to them it meant unfaithfulness to God. & so Paul urges us all to act in love. This is God's kind of love which chooses as an act of self-sacrifice to serve someone else. Now let's go back to the 2 friends & the wedding ring. Imagine the friend pressures him to take off his wedding ring & laughs at his reasoning why he won't remove it. He gives in & takes it off, but in his heart he feels guilty, as though he's broken his marriage vows. Paul's telling us if we're really serious about pursuing godly love with one another, we'll think about how our liberty will affect their spiritual growth. Once the friend knows about his beliefs about wedding rings, love would dictate he keep his ring on, at least when he's with this friend. We should never do something that causes the person for whom Christ died to stumble. **15b**

If Christ loved him so much, can't we limit our liberty for his sake? The loving, caring, strong Christian will determine in his heart, mind, & soul to be lovingly sensitive to any weakness in a fellow believer & avoid doing anything, including what's OK in itself, that might cause the other to stumble. We're to adjust to one another's needs in these areas. It isn't loving to force people to move at your pace. To decline to indulge a freedom that you have for the sake of someone else, to adjust to their pace, is one of the clearest & truest exercises of Christian love there is. & that's what Paul urges us to do. In 1 Cor 8 Paul again tells us that eating or not eating food has no spiritual significance in itself. & the same is true in all these grey, debatable areas.

Food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. But take care, lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak...For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died (similar to Rom 14:15). & thus, by sinning against the brethren & wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble (8-13).

Neither eating nor not eating certain things gains us favor with God. & the same is true over observing days or wearing purple sweat socks. None of these things will bring us closer to God or make us approved by Him. Doing things not forbidden by God has no significance in our relationship to Him. They're spiritually neutral. Food is an excellent illustration of this. Common sense & concern for the bodies God has given us should make us careful about what & how

much we eat. Gluttony is sinful & harmful & eating foods to which we're allergic is just stupid. But, in itself, eating or not eating certain foods has absolutely no spiritual significance. It doesn't matter if it's meat, ice cream, or broccoli. Jesus made it plain that **there is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man** (Mk 7:15). Paul told Timothy to receive all food with thankfulness (1 Tim 4:4). The point is that food makes no difference, it's neutral. But it can make a great difference with the conscience of some Christians. What wouldn't be wrong for us becomes wrong if it's a **stumbling block** or **obstacle** to a weaker Christian. If a weaker brother sees us doing something that bothers his conscience, his spiritual life can be harmed. We should never influence a fellow Christian to do anything that the Holy Spirit, through that person's conscience, is protecting him from. A strong believer may rightly see no harm for himself in dining in an establishment where meat sacrificed to idols is served. He doesn't accept the pagan beliefs or participate in the pagan practices. It's just not an issue. But if a weaker Christian sees a mature believer eating at the restaurant inside the temple, he may be tempted to go against his own conscience & eat there himself. That could be dangerous, causing him to go against his own conscience. It's never right to cause another believer to violate his conscience. & it's tragic when we hurt other Christians, particularly over matters that aren't inherently wrong. A weak Christian can be hurt or distressed from watching another Christian say or do something he considers sinful. A weak Christian also can be hurt when he's encouraged by a stronger brother to go against the convictions of his own conscience. He suffers feelings of guilt, & gives up his peace of mind, joy, & perhaps even his assurance of salvation. A Christian whose use of his liberty causes such hurt to other believers is no longer walking according to love as we're commanded to do. Our Christian liberty must never be used at the expense of a fellow Christian who's been redeemed at such a price as Christ's shed blood & death.

5. Destroy 15b

A number of scholars who believe in the eternal security of believers still argue that Paul is saying that if you cause a weaker brother to sin by violating his conscience, you could cause his

damnation. They explain this by saying if the weaker brother falls away so as to perish, then he was a **brother** in name only. Also, since Jesus will not lose any of His sheep for whom He laid down His life (John 10:28-29; 17:2, 12), they have to say it only appeared this person was one of God's elect. But his falling away proves he was not. In my mind the context & other Scripture overrides the usual meaning of the word & Paul means that flaunting your liberty will damage your brother's walk with God, not that you will cause a professing believer to go to eternal damnation. It's still a serious matter & we shouldn't minimize how bad it is to hurt a brother's walk with God. But I think it goes too far here to insist on the usual meaning of **destroy** which usually refers to utter devastation. But as Vine explains, *The idea is not extinction but ruin, loss, not of being, but of well-being.*³ Paul isn't speaking of their being **ruined** (1 Cor 8:8-12) or destroyed in the sense of damnation, because that's what believers are eternally saved from. He's speaking of the loss of such things as peace of mind, joy, a clear conscience, & spiritual growth. Again, This doesn't mean because of you, they're now eternally damned. It does mean because of you, they're spiritually devastated. Their faith is being shaken.⁴ By now you're probably thinking, *Does this mean that my brother's weakness in faith determines my lifestyle? Do I have to subscribe to my weaker brother's views? Must I limit the enjoyment of my knowledge of grace to his ignorance?* These questions reveal some of the difficulty of this issue. Let me answer by giving a warning to both sides, to the weak, or young in the Lord, & to the strong, or mature in the Lord.

A. Warning to the weak If you're saying things like this:

You shouldn't do that, it offends me. You shouldn't go there, it isn't right for me. Don't act like that, it hurts me as a believer & remember, Paul tells you to stop doing whatever offends another Christian.

If you do that, you're tipping your hand. You're as good as admitting out loud that growth is needed in your life. Accept the challenge, dig into the Word, test your views with the Scriptures, & struggle through the issues of grace & freedom & liberty.

B. Warning to the strong If you're saying things like:

³ *Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words*, p 294

⁴ See page 12 for a few reasons why this can't mean eternal ruin or destruction

I have the right to do this as a Christian. I'll debate anyone regarding my liberty in this area & I dare anyone to tell me I'm out of line. If you think I'm wrong, you're a weaker brother & you need to grow up.

You're tipping your hand as well. You aren't walking in love. You're giving no thought to this principle of protection Paul gives. Rather than hurt another Christian who's trying to grow, we must be willing to refrain from things that offend. After all, Jesus was willing to die for the weak. He didn't think equality with God was something to be held on to, but He relinquished the use of the privileges of deity for our sake (Phil 2). But neither is Paul saying the stronger brother must always be bound by the religious scruples of the weaker brother. Though he's to bend over backwards not to offend or hurt the weaker Christian, the stronger isn't to allow the weaker to exercise tyranny over the church.

In 1928 Donald Grey Barnhouse was speaking at a conference in PA where about 200 young people were present. One day 2 women came to him in horror because some girls weren't wearing stockings! These women wanted him to rebuke them. Barnhouse's reply is classic. As he tells it:

Looking them straight in the eye, I said, *The Virgin Mary never wore stockings.*

They gasped & said, *She didn't?*

I answered, *In Mary's time, stockings were unknown. So far as we know, they were 1st worn by prostitutes in Italy in the 15th century, when the Renaissance began. Later, a lady of the nobility wore stockings at a court ball, greatly to the scandal of many people. Before long, however, everyone in the upper classes was wearing stockings...*

These ladies, who were holdovers from the Victorian age, had no more to say. I didn't rebuke the girls for not wearing stockings. A year or 2 afterward, most girls in the US were going without stockings & nobody thought anything about it. Nor do I believe that this led toward disintegration of moral standards in the United States. Times were changing, & the step away from Victorian legalism was all for the better.⁵

Voluntary limiting of our freedom isn't meant to subject us to the prejudices of Christians who are well established in the faith but persistent in legalism. Paul isn't saying we should always try to please everyone around us. That's an impossible task. Some people are afraid to do anything in the fear that they may offend. There's a 2nd group of people who will *always* be offended by the exercise of our freedom. These are controlling people who insist you live life according to their rules & their consciences. They have no intention of letting you live by your convictions, unless

⁵ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *God's Covenants, God's Discipline, God's Glory*, Vol 4, p 4

they agree with them! We don't have to limit our freedom because of these people. They aren't weak, just determined. Paul was considerate of new believers but he was fierce in opposing the Judaizers who insisted that new Gentile believers had to convert to Judaism before they could be *true* Christians. Jesus was tender with those who were new to His teaching but confronted the Pharisees & Sadducees. We should do likewise. We must be gentle with the weak but firm with those who simply wish us to conform to their viewpoint. Sometimes Christians wrongly use this passage to force unbiblical rules on other believers. They tell them, *As a Christian, you can't dress or act that way. You must dress & act as I do. If you don't, you're causing me to stumble.* That's not what Paul's telling us to do here. We should refuse to surrender our freedoms when we're being called to a new form of legalism, which is when people make Christianity about rules rather than a relationship with Jesus. Legalism robs grace of its joy & often turns people from trusting God to trusting their own ability. In these situations we must preserve the freedom of the child of God. Paul would respect & accommodate weaker Christians, but he wouldn't allow the weaker ones to exercise tyranny over the church to the end that the gospel & its message would be distorted.

None of us have the right to indulge in an activity nor demand a liberty that may cause harm to someone else. & no one has the right to belittle the conscience of a fellow Christian, even if you're convinced their conscience is too sensitive or over-developed. God has entrusted us with the responsibility to live in Christian freedom with a concern & sensitivity for others that respects their conscience, our conscience, & what ultimately is the common good. **Determine this, if you're going to judge, judge this: not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.** Easy to say, hard to do. But with God's help we can & we must look out for one another in this way. So when you're weighing your decision over what to wear or where to go or what to do with another Christian from a heavily traditional background or a liberally skewed background, remember how much more important that brother is than your freedom. Living the Christian life is like walking a tightrope. As you walk the rope, you hold the balancing pole in your hands. On

one end is your Christian freedom; on the other is care & concern for your brother. On one end is liberty & on the other end is love.⁶

There are several reasons why this can't refer to eternal destruction.

A) Are we really to believe that a Christian's single act against his own conscience, which isn't his fault but the fault of the strong who misled him, merits eternal condemnation? No, hell is reserved only for those who don't believe in Jesus' death & resurrection for them.

B) Paul just stated the eternal security of the believer in Rom 8:28-39 & 14:4. If nothing in all creation can separate the Christian from the love of Christ, then surely another believer's callous disregard for a weak brother's religious scruples can't do so!

C) Jesus said clearly in Jn 10:28 that His sheep will **never perish**. Clearly, then, the destruction in vs 15 must refer to something less than & different from the loss of eternal salvation.

D) The context gives a perfectly reasonable explanation of Paul's words. He envisions serious damage to both the conscience of the weak believer & to his growth as a disciple of Jesus. **To destroy... him for whom Christ died**, isn't to cause his damnation but to harm his spiritual growth.

E) The ultimate destiny of another soul is never in our hands. If we could cause anyone to be eternally lost, then our power would be greater than God's, who alone is able both to save & to keep us for eternity (Rom 8:31-39). If sinning against our conscience destroys us, we'd all perish, because we've all sinned in this manner

⁶ Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Liberty & Conscience*, p 191-192