

Handle With Care
Romans 14:16-19
ABC 5/14/17

In 1988 a group of friends formed a band called the *Traveling Wilburys*. Roy Orbison, Bob Dylan, George Harrison, Jeff Lynne, & Tom Petty. The 1st song they released was called *Handle With Care* & it began like this:

Been beat up & battered 'round
Been sent up, & I've been shot down

Could those 2 lines describe your experience with another Christian at some point in your life? Paul's been teaching us to handle our freedoms & liberties with great care so we don't harm the spiritual life of those around us; so we don't beat up, batter round, & shoot each other down. Our freedom in Christ isn't to do whatever we want with no thought for others around us. We're not given freedom to flaunt our freedoms & force them on others. We're given freedom to speak the truth in love & die to ourselves in serving others & protecting them from spiritual stumbling. We're free to treat other Christians as loved family members whose consciences we want to guard. We're free to be patient & not pressuring as we sacrifice our freedoms to lovingly protect others, after all Jesus died for them. Apparently, some of the Christians in Rome were putting their liberty above love. They weren't handling with care their freedoms in Christ. It appears that, for Paul, one of the greatest indicators of maturity in the faith was the way one exercised his liberty in grey areas. If you want to know the character & heart of someone, watch the way they treat this issue of grace. Watch to see whether they limit their liberty or restrict their rights for the benefit & care of others. Yes, we're free in Christ. But this doesn't mean we're free to do anything we want. We're free to do what Jesus wants. So what does He want? He wants us not to put an **obstacle** or a **stumbling block** in another Christian's path. They're learning to walk, so don't throw your liberty in their way. We must balance our Christian walk with liberty on one hand & with love for our brother on the other. **13-18** PRAY

1. Good Spoken of as Evil Vs 16 begins with the word **therefore**, which takes us back to the warnings not to hurt or **destroy** others by the use of our liberty. If we don't walk in love for others enough to sacrifice our freedoms in non-essentials, then, Paul says, we'll lead people to mock

God & His people. We can abuse our liberty in Christ so that we create conflicts within the church that give the world cause to criticize & condemn those who claim to love their brothers. Although it brings blessing & enjoyment to those who understand & exercise it properly, our freedoms aren't simply for our benefit & our selfish desires. It's a gracious gift from God but like every other divine blessing, it can be misused in ways that are contrary to God's purposes. Our liberty is to be used carefully, with loving concern for our weaker brethren & with concern for our witness to the unbelieving world around us. It shouldn't cause others to stumble, be grieved, or harmed in any way; & it should never give the watching world an excuse for it to be spoken of as evil.

When we don't love Christians with different opinions on non-essential issues, we tempt others to dismiss our God. The **good thing** here, I believe, refers to the liberty to do anything you have the freedom in Christ to do. Paul's saying that unbelievers can legitimately speak of our freedom in Christ as **evil** if it results in the fall of another Christian. When we exercise our freedom without careful handling it can lead to evil results. There's the person who says, *I don't care what anybody thinks, I have the freedom to do what I think is right*. This person has forgotten the most important thing isn't necessarily an issue of being right, it's an issue of reputation & of love. Paul tells us: *Don't let your liberty create an opportunity for slander*. Of course, sometimes we're slandered by unbelievers for choosing to do something that is right for us. Vice-President Pence not long ago was vilified for simply saying he doesn't dine alone with any woman other than his wife. Here's one headline: *Vice President Pence's "never dine alone with a woman" rule isn't honorable. It's probably illegal*.¹ His comment was met with ridicule, mockery, & even accusations of misogyny. In the article just mentioned, it said,

Pence's defenders said he was merely acting prudently, & expressed amazement at the all the fuss. Yet we know that women pay a heavy price for behavior that either resembles his or falls on the same continuum.

Whether you agree or disagree with Pence in this decision, Paul tells us to forebear with anyone who's making a good-faith effort to pursue holiness. You may not always agree with the method

¹ www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/3/31/15132730/pence-women-alone-rule-graham-discrimination

with which some pursue their strategies for holiness. But try to see the best in the good-faith efforts of those who are trying to pursue holiness.² Paul is saying,

Don't apologize for or renounce your freedom in Christ, & don't let your own conscience be bothered. Take advantage of your liberty with joy & gratitude, because it's a gift from God. But be willing at any time to forfeit the exercise of your freedom if it might cause spiritual harm to a believer or become an unnecessary offense to an unbeliever. It's much more important to demonstrate our love than our freedom.

Let me give 2 practical guidelines:

A. Accept that You are Being Watched Whether it's by younger adults or children, or younger believers in the faith, it would probably surprise you to know how carefully you're being watched. This is the warning that Paul gave to Timothy when he wrote, **in speech, conduct, love, faith & purity, show yourself an example to those who believe** (1 Tim 4:12b). This is a nice way of saying, *You're being watched! Therefore, be an example!*

B. Admit You have Influence You aren't only being watched, you're probably going to be copied as well. You, whether you know it or not, are an influence on those around you. If you take your good faith & your good freedom & use it in any way that causes a brother to be grieved or to be tripped up spiritually then your faith & freedom won't be praised but spoken of as evil. In fact, they'll have become evil because you're no longer walking in love (15). & lovelessness should be spoke of as evil because it is evil. Many unbelievers' biggest reason for ignoring God is what they've seen a Christian do. Now certainly, sometimes they have a wrong perspective on what it means to be a Christian, but many times our liberty can harm our ability to tell the world about Jesus. What we intended for good, & what really is good, can be spoken of as evil when we don't limit our liberties when it's appropriate. Many non-Christians say, *Why should I be a Christian? You don't get along with each other, so why should I think becoming a Christian will bring peace or happiness?* What's more important to you, exercising your liberty or making sure nothing you do can be spoken of as evil? The Pharisees are classic examples of focusing on the trivial & missing the main thing. Jesus told them,

Woe to you, scribes & Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint & dill & cummin, & have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice & mercy & faithfulness; but these are the things you

² <http://www.dennyburk.com/ten-thoughts-about-the-billy-graham-rule/>

should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat & swallow a camel! (Mt 23:23-24).

The law commanded tithing, & these guys took that very seriously. All the while, Jesus says, they neglected the heart of the law, which was **justice, mercy, & faithfulness**. John brings out the same thing when he points out that when the Jewish leaders led Jesus to Pilate so they could crucify Him, they wouldn't go into the Praetorium so they wouldn't be defiled, because they wanted to eat the Passover (Jn 18:28)! Here they were, crucifying the sinless Son of God, but they didn't want to defile themselves by walking on Gentile ground so they could observe their religious ritual! Of course, Paul had been the same way. He was so zealous for the Law he persecuted anyone who was a Jewish follower of Jesus. He was imprisoning & even killing Christians in the name of religion, but he'd missed the main thing, which is to know Jesus Christ (Phil 3:4-11). We too often get caught up in the externals while we ignore the internals which are eternal.

Henry Ironside, was once at a SS picnic in Detroit where a former Muslim from India, who had come to know Christ, was present. His name was Mohammed Ali & he ran his father's tea business in the States. As Ironside & he were chatting, a young woman came by passing out sandwiches. Ironside helped himself to several, but when Mr. Ali learned they were ham sandwiches, he declined to take any. The young woman laughingly said, *Why, Mr. Ali, you surprise me. Are you so under law that you can't eat pork? Don't you know a Christian is at liberty to eat any kind of meat?*

I am at liberty to eat it, he said, but I am also at liberty to let it alone. I was brought up a strict Muslim. My old father, nearly 80 years of age now, is still a Muslim. Every 3 years I go back to India to give an account of the business & to visit the folks at home. Always I know how I will be greeted. The friends will be sitting inside. My father will come to the door & say, 'Mohammed, have those infidels taught you to eat the filthy hog meat yet?'

*'No, father,' I will say. 'Pork has never passed my lips.' Then I can go in & have the opportunity to preach Christ to them. If I took one of your sandwiches, I could not preach Christ to my father the next time I go home.'*³

Are we that careful with our liberties?

2. The Kingdom of God 17

This vs begins with the word **for** because it's giving a reason why we aren't to let our freedoms cause a brother to be hurt or destroyed & thus why our good shouldn't be spoken of as evil. Paul's saying the main thing is not exercising your liberty in Christ or demanding your rights. The main thing is God's kingdom. But what does he mean by **the kingdom of God**? George Ladd

³ H. A. Ironside, *1 Corinthians*, pp 244-246

wrote, *The 'kingdom of God' means primarily the rule of God, the divine kingly authority.*⁴ The **kingdom of God** is the realm in which God rules. That's why there's a sense in which the whole world is God's kingdom; He is sovereign over His entire creation. At the same time, the rule of God describes His relationship to those who acknowledge His rule & submit to Him. This means the kingdom of God is present whenever we come to acknowledge His rule & reflect His character.⁵ We tend to think of a kingdom as a place. But for Jesus & Paul it almost never has that meaning. Rather it means the reign or the rule of God. You can see that here: Wherever the Holy Spirit is bringing about **righteousness & peace & joy**, the kingdom, the reign of God is being manifested. & a kingdom has a king, & Jesus is God's anointed King (Ps 2:6-7). We are either in Satan's domain of darkness (Mt 4:8; 12:26) or in God's kingdom, subject to His King. Paul said, **For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, & transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins** (Col 1:13). Jesus said we can only enter God's kingdom through the new birth (Jn 3:3, 5). So He preached, **The time is fulfilled, & the kingdom of God is at hand; repent & believe in the gospel** (Mk 1:15). The gospel, the good news is that God sent His only Son to bear the punishment that we deserve for our sins. He forgives all our sins & imputes the righteousness of Jesus to those who believe in Him. God's kingdom exists now wherever Jesus reigns in the hearts of His people who submit to His rule. But Jesus also spoke about His kingdom that would come in fullness in the future when He returns. He taught us to pray, **Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven** (Mt 6:10). As He gave them the cup, Jesus told the disciples at the last supper, **But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom** (Mt 26:29). That kingdom will come when Jesus comes again bodily, in His glory. The kingdom of God is fulfilled partially in the present & will be consummated at the end of the age when Jesus comes again. It's an already, but not yet, sort of thing. We see the same thing in our salvation. In Christ we're already saved from sin's penalty, but we aren't yet saved from sin's presence. We're

⁴ *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, editor Walter Elwell, p. 608

⁵ Boice, J. M. *Romans: The New Humanity*, Vol 4, p. 1774

already saved & free in one sense but we aren't yet saved & totally free in another sense. In a similar way, in Christ we're already in God's kingdom but we aren't yet finally in God's kingdom. We're already in God's kingdom in the sense that He comes to rule in our hearts when we trust Jesus in this life. That rule of God by faith in Christ is by the Holy Spirit who regenerates us & gives us faith & grows us in grace. But we are not yet in God's final kingdom because we're still in this fallen world with our fleshly temptations & Jesus hasn't yet come to set up His kingly rule on earth. It already exists wherever people surrender to Jesus as Lord & we experience a taste of His kingdom rule now. But when He returns in power & glory, He'll subdue all of His enemies, including Satan, who will be bound & cast into a pit for the 1,000 years (Rev 20:2). During that time, Jesus will rule the nations with a rod of iron (Rev 19:15). God's kingdom will then reign on earth through Jesus in its fullness. So the crucial question is, *Are you in God's kingdom right now? Have you trusted in Jesus as your Savior? Are you in submission to Him as your King?* That's the main thing! Don't major on the minors. Make sure your life, internally & externally, is subject to Jesus as your King!

A. Not Eating & Drinking We're prone to think God's kingdom primarily involves what a person does or does not do. That's how the Pharisees lived, making a big deal of externals. But the kingdom of God isn't defined by things like food & drink but by Spirit-empowered internals that are anchored in the eternal gospel. When you define Christianity by what to eat & drink or not eat & not drink or by what to wear or what not to wear or where to go or not go, you've missed the point. In God's kingdom, freedom comes from what He tells you, not from what people tell. Christianity is about the reign of God in our hearts through faith in the finished work of Jesus applied by the power of the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, we often spend our time worrying about what people think & we never get around to finding out what God thinks. Paul's asking: *How can you fight about such little things & miss the big things?* Paul says the Kingdom of God is made up of eternal things like **righteousness, peace, & joy in the Holy Spirit**. You may think your liberty in Christ to do as you're fully convinced is what God's kingdom produces. But that's not quite right.

What the kingdom produces is something deeper & larger that governs how you use your liberty to do all things.

B. God's Kingdom is ... 17

These 3 words, **righteousness, peace, & joy** are loaded with theological truths. Scholars divide into 2 camps over the interpretation of them. Is Paul describing our standing or position in Christ or is he describing practical righteousness, relational peace, & the joy we experience with one another as we live in harmony? I agree with Leon Morris who writes, *It seems likely that Paul is not differentiating sharply between these 2 views & that he is using the expression in a way that suggests both.*⁶ I also believe the concluding words, **in the Holy Spirit**, apply to all 3 qualities, not just to **joy**. Earlier in Romans, Paul emphasized that the gospel is all about the righteousness of God being imputed to those who believe in Jesus as the sacrifice for their sins (1:16-17; 3:21-26; 4:1-25). Our practical righteousness & the peace we work out with each other is built on the perfect righteousness that He imputes to us by faith alone & the peace we enjoy with Him. In 5:1-2, Paul mentions these 3 qualities:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; & we exult in hope of the glory of God.

To be **justified by faith** is to be declared righteous by God. This brings us into **peace with God**, leading to our exulting or being joyful in the **hope of the glory of God**. Since all 3 qualities are produced by (or in the sphere of) the Holy Spirit & are characteristic of God's kingdom, they must at least in part refer to our relationship with God. But our relationship with God obviously affects our relationship with others in His kingdom. Because of our new standing as righteous before God, we seek to practice righteousness (Rom 6:13, 18; 1 Jn 2:29; 3:7). Because we have peace with God, we're to pursue peace with others (Rom 14:19; Eph 2:14-22). Because we know the joy of God's salvation, we love to share our joy with others who enjoy the same blessings. The Holy Spirit is working these things right now. That, Paul says, is **the kingdom of God**. In other words, the work of the Holy Spirit & the advancing of the kingdom of God are the same thing. This is

⁶ *The Epistle to the Romans*, p 489

what we see in the ministry of Jesus as well. In Mt 12:28. Jesus said, **If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.** The work of the Spirit is the presence of the kingdom of God. Or to say it another way, the reign of God is exercised through His Spirit. So when the Spirit rules & conquers our selfishness & pride, & replaces it with Christ-like righteousness, then we won't grieve & destroy a brother for the sake of our freedom. The Spirit of God, the kingdom of God, creates **righteousness & peace & joy.** This is what the Spirit of God does. These 3 qualities serve as a summary of being in God's kingdom: we are rightly related to God & to one another, which are the 2 great commandments. These qualities are a benchmark by which you can evaluate whether you're focused on the right thing. Do you know you're in right standing with God, that all of your sins are forgiven, & that you're clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Himself? Do you know you are at peace with God? Are you experiencing the joy of your salvation? If not, there could be a number of reasons. You may not be spending enough time thinking about God's grace you've received in the gospel. You may not be processing your trials through the lens of the hope of the gospel (Rom 5:1-5; Js 1:2-4; 1 Pt 1:3-9). Or, you may be yielding to temptation & sin, which always robs us of joy in our relationship with God. Then evaluate your relationships with others, especially with your fellow citizens in God's kingdom. Are you practicing righteousness in your relationships? Do you think of others' needs & how you can serve them? Are you at peace with others? If you've offended or wronged someone, have you tried to make it right? Have you asked forgiveness for your wrongs & granted forgiveness to those who've wronged you? Do you enjoy sharing the things of God with His people? All of these qualities grow in us as we walk in the power of the Holy Spirit. **Love, joy, & peace** are His fruits (Gal 5:22). All of the fruit of the Spirit have a relational dimension. To walk in the Spirit is to yield to the Spirit on a moment-by-moment basis. It's to trust in His power for victory over sin.

What does this mean? It means we're to have healthy, godly relationships that flow from our relationship with God. If you can win arguments about theology, but kill relationships when doing so, you're on the wrong track. If you take pride in what you do for the Lord, you're off the track.

The main thing is God's kingdom, where He rules & you submit. God's kingdom centers on your relationship with Him & with others.

So evaluate your life. Can it be characterized by these 3 words, **righteousness, peace, & joy**? Let me ask some hard questions:

- Is what you're doing with your Christian liberty marked by righteousness? Paul told the Philippian church to be continually **filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory & praise of God (1:11)**.
- Does your Christian walk create peace or war? Rom 12 dealt with the issue of getting along with one another in the church. Do you handle your freedoms with care?
- Does your lifestyle promote joy or gloom? Paul refers to the believer's **joy in the Holy Spirit (1 Thes 1:6)** & that **the fruit of the Spirit is ... joy (Gal 5:22)**. Is your life marked with joy?

One pastor tells of a man in his church who came up to him one Sunday & told him the NT never mentions Jesus smiling or laughing, & therefore, believers shouldn't do so either.⁷ The Bible never mentions that Jesus took a bath or combed His hair either, but He probably did. That man needed a dose of joy. Grim, pickled, sourness isn't a spiritual gift. Sometimes the worst advertisement for Christianity is Christians. Don't be one of them.

Paul sums up 13-17 & brings us back to the main point. We're to...

3. Serve Christ 18

This **way** refers to what Paul just described in vs 17. You serve Christ by focusing on **righteousness, peace, & joy in the Holy Spirit**. To serve in a way that is **acceptable to God** goes back to Rom 12:1-2,

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living & holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. & do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good & acceptable & perfect.

Whoever serves, obeys, & pursues the righteousness that Christ commands, in the way described in vs 17, is pleasing to God. What's that mean? It means we must depend on the Holy Spirit for what we pursue. He always remains the Supplier. Peter exhorts each of us to be **one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ (1 Pt 4:11)**. Serve with the expectation that the strength to serve will come

⁷ R. Kent Hughes, *Romans*, p 269

from God. Then God will get all the glory. & remember, serving God isn't to win His favor in the future final judgment but our service that pleases God in the here & now.

To be **approved by men** stands in contrast to vs 16, where others speak evil of those who've hurt their brothers by flaunting their liberty. But how can we be **approved by men**? Jesus said the world will hate us because we're not like them & because He chose us out of the world (Jn 15:18-19). He told us to expect opposition from the world (Jn 16:2). So how do we harmonize this with being **approved by men**? How can we live for Christ & be approved by man? In general, unbelievers will appreciate the fact that you keep your word, work hard, tell the truth, & respect others. Paul seems to mean if we lay aside our rights & demonstrate genuine concern & love for our fellow Christians, the world must at least acknowledge that we're genuine. They won't be able to accuse us of being hypocrites. It's like Paul said of elders, they must have a good reputation with those outside of the church (1 Tim 3:7). They must have a reputation for being honest & treat others with respect & kindness. Even if they don't agree with your Christian faith, they must admit you treated them right (1 Cor 10:32-33). Clearly, we aren't out to please the world, & we will not please it. There will be those who dislike, mock, & revile you. If the world hated our Lord & Master enough to crucify Him, we can be sure that it'll hate us too. At the same time though, there should be within followers of Jesus enough of His character, truth, love, & integrity that some looking on will, perhaps reluctantly, acknowledge that the believer is indeed living an exemplary life. They should be able to acknowledge that Christians are real. The world must not be able to shake its finger at us & call us unloving hypocrites.

John Stott tells about 2 Englishmen who were riding in a railway carriage. In the next carriage was a man whom one man thought looked like the Archbishop of Canterbury. *No, he's not*, said the friend.

Yes, he is, said the 1st.

Eventually they decided to make a bet on whether the 3rd gentleman was the archbishop or not. They agreed on their terms. Then the traveler who thought the man was the leader of the Church of England went to the man & asked him if he were by any chance the Archbishop of Canterbury. The man replied with a curse, swearing that blankety-blank he was not the blankety-blank Archbishop of Canterbury. The questioner went back to his friend & said, *The bet's off. There's no way to tell whether he's the archbishop or not.*⁸

⁸ Boice, J. M. *Romans: The New Humanity*, Vol 4, p 1785

Don't be that Christian that people see no difference between you & any other pagan.

Donald Grey Barnhouse was once teaching about Christians being in the world, but not of the world. He concluded,

*You may be sure that if nobody thinks you are strange & out of step, you are not a good Christian. After the message, a friend who had been present wisely added, However, you should also say that if everybody thinks you are strange & out of step, you are not a good Christian.*⁹

Don't spend your life arranging deck chairs on the Titanic. Don't get side-tracked & derailed by secondary matters. Keep God's kingdom central & remember it doesn't focus solely on external things, but on our relationship with Him & with others. Handle your freedoms with care. Live a life marked by **righteousness & peace & joy**. By doing so you're an authentic testimony to the name & cause of Christ. We're acceptable to God because He's imputed Christ's righteousness to us. We're approved by men as they see our practical righteousness, our desire for peace, & our joy in the Holy Spirit. Our righteous standing before God through faith in Christ, the **peace** we enjoy with God because of being reconciled to Him, & the **joy** of our salvation are the basis for our righteous deeds, our **peace** with our brothers & sisters in Christ, & our shared **joy** in the Lord. We must limit our liberty for the sake of others & we must make sure we're allowing what really matters guide our lives. What pleases God, & wins the approval of others, is when our serving is a product of the Holy Spirit working within us. This is why the writer to the Hebrews closed his book with this benediction, may **the God of peace . . . equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever & ever. Amen** (13:20-21).

⁹ ibid p 1784