

## Build Up or Tear Down?

Romans 14:19-23

ABC 5/21/17

Why is it that being judgmental is our default setting? If you say you're a Lakers' fan I immediately judge you as an idiot! But in light of eternity, does it matter if you're a King's fan or a Lakers' fan? Not a bit. Likewise, Paul tells us in Rom 14, that it doesn't matter if you eat meat or are a vegetarian or whether or not you observe religious holidays. These may not be the issues we face today, but the principles Paul gives still stand. Remember, Paul's writing to Christians about issues which are neither commanded nor condemned in Scripture & he doesn't tell us we all have to agree. He allows us to hold differing views & teaches us how to love each other even with these differences. After giving some of the deepest & most profound doctrines found in Scripture, Paul tells us how to get along in the church, having agreed on the essentials, but giving freedom in the other stuff. Yet, when someone disagrees with us over these debatable things, we often get judgmental, critical, divisive, & break the unity we're to have within the church. As Christians we're called by God to live with one another as a family, as a body, as a church. We're to do so even though there are differences in what we believe in things that are debatable or matters of preference. Bound together by the gospel & sharing a common belief in the foundations of our faith, we're to love one another even through diversity. Rom 14-15:13 is a text that applies to all Christians as we seek to hold to what we believe & as we strive to live in fellowship & unity with people who hold equally strong & opposite views in these areas. We've been learning how to disagree without being disagreeable, how to overcome a judgmental spirit, & how to deal with differences. This is only possible when we realize that in disputable matters our motto should be, *Not wrong, just different*. Today we come to the final vss of Romans 14 & we'll see 4 ways we can build others up. **Rom 14:16-23** PRAY

Our text today doesn't say much that's new. Instead, Paul repeats what he's already said. But since the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to repeat these concepts, rather than tuning out, we need to tune in. These are things we may be prone to forget & so we need to hear them again.<sup>1</sup> Paul is

reminding us not to put our rights or minor issues in place of the main issue, which is God's kingdom & the relationships we're to promote as members of that kingdom. He tells us 1<sup>st</sup> ...

**1. Pursue Peace & the Building Up of One Another** (19) So then, because of all that's been said up to this point, **pursue the things which make for peace**. Those **things** are the actions, thoughts, practices, & motives that flow from our having peace with God & into peace with others. As we let our love for our fellow Christians limit our liberty & care for others as Jesus does, then we'll pursue peace & look for ways to build up those around us. I love that Paul includes himself in this by using the word **us**. These words are for every Christian. & **pursue** isn't a passive concept. It's used of a hunter chasing his prey. You don't pursue something accidentally. It takes deliberate effort & persistence. We must determine to go after the things that make for **peace** & the building up of one another. We aren't to be laid back thinking, *Well, if it happens, great! If not, OK*. Rather, we're to go after these things with determined zeal. It's like a runner in a race exerting all they have to reach the finish line. For example:

A mother said to her son, *I won't take any of you to the zoo if you don't forgive Billy for stealing your candy bar.*

*But Billy doesn't want to be forgiven, her son complained. He won't even listen.*

Exasperated, his mother demanded, *Then make him!*

Suddenly, her son chased Billy, knocked him to the ground, sat on him, & yelled, *I forgive you for stealing my candy bar!*<sup>1</sup>

We aren't to be quite that aggressive in pursuing peace, but we are to pursue it! Do you do this? Do you do all you can to try to make peace with your fellow Christian when you're at odds? Pursuing peace takes effort & isn't always easy. It takes a lot of work to put our pride, selfishness, & judgmental spirit behind us. We must **pursue** this at all times, daily, moment-by-moment as a way of life. One paraphrase puts it like this: *Let's agree to use all our energy in getting along with each other.*<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said:

*The followers of Jesus have been called to peace. When He called them they found their peace, for He is their peace. But now they are told that they must not only have peace but make it.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Josephine Ligon, *Your Daffodils are Pretty*, *Christianity Today*, 3/2/1979, p 18

<sup>2</sup> *The Message*, Romans 14:19

<sup>3</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship*, p 112

Jesus said in Mt 5:9, **Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God.** Jesus didn't tell us to be *peacekeepers* but *peacemakers*, those who work at bringing peace. Once again, remember the context. In debatable issues where we disagree, we're to **pursue the things that make for peace.** What things make for peace? Things like humility. How does humility make for peace? Because humility says I don't care about my rights & I'm more concerned about your rights than mine. Humility, meekness, unselfishness, & love are the things that make for peace. Those are the things we should be pursuing. We can't be passive about peace; it must be pursued. What else does the Bible say about the importance of pursuing peace?

Ps 34:14: **Depart from evil & do good; Seek peace & pursue it.**

Rom 12:18: **If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.**

2 Cor 13:11: **Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; & the God of love & peace will be with you.**

Eph 4:2-3: **showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**

When we pursue peace, even with differences on these non-essential issues, we build up or edify each other. This is the 1<sup>st</sup> time Paul uses the words **building up**, which is translated in 15:2 as **edification**. This is a construction term used to describe a building going up brick-by-brick or the process of making a structure stronger to improve its usefulness & extend its life. Sometimes we need to build from the ground up & other times we're called to come alongside someone in order to build them back up. Paul tells us in 1 Cor 14:12 to **excel in gifts that build up the church**. Even though we don't all agree on these debatable issues, we can experience peace & build each other up. That's what Paul is telling us to do. Whether we like to admit it or not, our words, behaviors, & interactions with each other either strengthen or weaken the church. Remember what Eph 4:29 says?

**Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.**

We know that love builds up by bearing another's burdens & prayer builds up by seeking God for others. We know it builds up for us to listen to others so we understand & don't rush to judgment

on them. We know that words of comfort & encouragement & hope build up in a world that tears down with temptations, trials, & troubles. We know thanksgiving builds up because it points people to God as the source of our blessings & it highlights ways that God is proving His grace in them. & we could go on & on.

But all too often we're like the husband who was impossible to please. If his wife made scrambled eggs, he wanted them poached. If the eggs were poached, he wanted them scrambled. One morning his wife had what she thought was a brilliant idea. She decided to poach one & scramble the other. When she brought it to him, she thought for sure he'd be happy. He peered down at the plate & snorted, *You scrambled the wrong one!*<sup>4</sup>

Does that describe any of us in relation to those who don't agree with us on these issues that don't matter? Are you always unhappy & do your words cut deeply? Or are you pursuing peace & building up those around you, especially those who don't agree with you? God gives no loopholes here. He doesn't say, *Pursue peace & building up one another except if you've been treated badly or if they deserve the silent treatment.* There is no getting around this clear command of God. As Peter put it (1 Pt 3:8-9),

**To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, & humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.**

Our job is to pursue peace & the things that build up others. This doesn't mean peace at any cost, because that often doesn't build up the other person. If the other person is sinning or embracing false doctrine, you aren't building them up by ignoring their behavior. Our aim should be to pursue godly relationships. What are we building into the lives of others? After having spent time with you, does a person feel encouraged to live for Christ or are they discouraged? Donald Barnhouse tells of a missionary who compiled a list of things that destroy other believers, rather than build them up. The things that brought destruction included:

- Self-seeking
- A pharisaical spirit
- Playing God for others
- Hypocrisy
- Failing to appreciate others' gifts
- Lack of patience
- Not sympathizing with others' infirmities
- Speaking evil

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<sup>4</sup> <https://okiemanofgod.wordpress.com/2015/02/>

- Assuming always that others are at fault
- Suspecting others' motives
- A domineering spirit
- A rebellious spirit
- Snobbery
- Hatred
- Grumbling
- Arguing
- Murmuring
- Maliciousness
- Being nosy
- Greediness
- Bitterness
- Resentment
- Instability
- Spite
- Laziness
- Economic freeloading
- Lying & slander
- Jealousy
- Thinking too highly of oneself
- A critical spirit toward others

The missionary also made a list of things that edified others. This list is as convicting as the 1<sup>st</sup>.

The tools he listed included:

- Willingness to be in subjection to others
- Considering others better than oneself
- An understanding spirit
- Not insisting on our rights
- Willingness to confess a wrong spirit
- Sincerity
- A generous & sympathetic spirit
- Trusting others
- Having faith in Jesus, not in self or others
- Joyfulness
- Prayer
- Discretion
- A critical spirit toward oneself
- A gentle & quiet spirit
- Humility
- Using our gifts for one another
- Remembering our own mistakes, not those of others
- Christ-centeredness
- Love in word & deed
- Fair dealing
- Integrity
- Recognizing one's place
- A forgiving spirit
- Doing things decently & in order
- Conscientiousness
- Faithfulness
- Being responsible to perform the tasks given to us

- Not misusing our authority over others
- Being willing to follow those in authority over us.<sup>5</sup>

Which list describes you? Are you pursuing peace & the building up of others?

**2. Don't Tear Down God's Work.** The opposite of *building up* is to **tear down** & is used in vs **20a**.

Do not tear down, destroy, demolish, dissolve, or in any way deprive the **work of God**. Paul's warnings about food & drink relate to anything that's not sinful in itself; an area the Bible doesn't address. But if a weaker brother sees you doing what you're at liberty to do & he's led to violate his conscience by doing the same, your freedom becomes sin for you. As Paul said, **you are no longer walking according to love** (15). Also in this context, **the work of God** clearly refers to believers, all of whom **are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus** (Eph 2:10). Therefore, it's not only a serious offense against a weaker brother to cause him to stumble but a serious offense against the purposes of God. We'd consider it an appalling crime for someone to paint over a Rembrandt masterpiece, shatter a sculpture by Michelangelo, or smash a Stradivarius violin. How infinitely worse it is to **tear down the work of God, someone for whom Christ died** (Rom. 14:15). **By sinning against the brethren & wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ**, Paul wrote as he rebuked the immature & self-indulgent believers at Corinth. **Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble**, he said of himself, **I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble** (1 Cor 8:12–13). As we've seen, **food** is symbolic of any discretionary thing you might have a right to do. Don't destroy **the work of God** by tearing down someone who disagrees with you. Don't pull down what God is building up!

Too often our attitude & words are like the couple who had an argument while they were driving down a country road. Neither of them was saying anything because they were both too mad to talk. But when they passed a barnyard full of mules, the wife sarcastically asked, *Relatives of yours?* Without missing a beat, the husband replied. *Yep. In-laws.*<sup>6</sup>

We're just like that when we tear apart the unity of the church by our words toward those who disagree with us over non-essential issues. Again, this doesn't mean we never discuss the issue or study Scripture so as to live more faithfully. But love should compel us to sacrifice our

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<sup>5</sup> *Romans, Vol 4, p 21*

<sup>6</sup> <http://new-brunswick.net/new-brunswick/jokes/jokes13.html>

freedom if needed. Without love, something that may be right or good can become evil. Paul again repeats what he's been saying throughout this chapter. 20b-21

Again, Paul isn't speaking about sinful things but about discretionary liberties that are good gifts from God. All such **things indeed are clean** & good in themselves (1, 16). The danger is when they're used selfishly or carelessly; then those blessings can become **evil for the man who eats & gives offense**. Because of that, **it is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything** else that is good in itself, **by which your brother stumbles** (21). Why is it good to be willing to give up our freedoms? Because if we aren't we can cause some to stumble & we hinder **the work of God**. God is building that believer up while we're tearing him down. We willingly alter our pace of walking while leading a small child by the hand so they don't stumble. How much more should we be willing to alter our Christian walk for the benefit of a weaker brother whom we love? We must be aware of the sensitivities of others & respect differing convictions. Our liberty must be limited by love.

We should also note a point that Paul is not making in this text, although it's often read into it. The weak brother isn't someone who has a propensity to a particular vice. Paul doesn't urge the strong believer to abstain because he's worried that our example may lead that individual to a life of ruin. This concern may well be valid, but it isn't what Paul is teaching here. The weak are not those who have a past problem of abusing their freedoms. Their weakness is spiritual. It's an inability to see that their faith allows them freedom. The potential problem isn't that they may indulge to excess but that they do so when their faith is still telling them not to.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, we must love other Christians more than we love our freedoms. This is **good** or *beautiful* because it shows pride is gone & it's done unselfishly. It's **good** & *beautiful* because people are recognizing secondary issues for what they are. It is **good** & *beautiful* because it puts others 1<sup>st</sup>. Love that guards against giving offense is what must inform our use of freedom on eating or drinking or whatever we do. We must ask ourselves, *Do I love people more than I love being right?* The question isn't, *Can I do this?* but rather, *If I do this, how will it affect the believers around me?*

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas Moo, *Romans*, pp 468-469

Paul is challenging us to be builders instead of demolishers. Our highest priority in relationships with others should be their edification, not their destruction. The pleasure of doing anything our freedom allows is trivial compared to the spiritual welfare of a brother in Christ. What we have the freedom to do becomes sinful if we have reason to believe it might cause another to trip or stumble. Have you been edifying, strengthening, & building up those around you, especially if you disagree over some of these secondary issues? Are you a member of the construction team or the demolition team? Make it your goal, give it your effort, to bring peace & build up others! When we selfishly put our rights above a brother's spiritual growth & above God's kingdom, relationships will suffer & God's work will be damaged. People will speak evil of what for us is a good thing (14:16). We must preserve the priority of His kingdom, which focuses on our relationship with Him & with others, rather than on our rights with regard to our liberty. Pursue peace & build up others, don't tear down God's work, & ...

**3. Keep Your Convictions Quiet.** There are certain truths that all Christians must accept because they're clearly taught in Scripture. However, some of us may feel like we have to tell everyone what we've decided about every debatable topic. According to vs 22, the way of wisdom is to keep some things private: **22a.**

Your personal convictions are just that: personal. Again, Paul isn't referring to things where the Bible gives clear moral commands. He isn't saying, *If you think adultery is OK, just be convinced in your own mind. Or, if you think stealing is allowed in certain circumstances, just have that as your own conviction before God.* Adultery, stealing, & many other things are always sin for all people in all circumstances. Your conviction to the contrary doesn't make them OK. God's Word, not our opinion, defines what's sinful. What Paul is talking about is developing convictions in areas where the Bible doesn't give direct commands. For instance, the Bible never says, *You shall not watch movies, TV, or play video games.* You have to develop convictions about these & many other things by extrapolating biblical principles that apply. What Paul tells us here is, *If you have faith that you can do these things, have it between yourself & God.* Let God & God's Word, & nothing else, be the basis of your faith. Be sure what you're doing isn't because of pride &



wanting to show off how free you are. Do it because God has freed you by His Word. He gave you these liberties personally & they should stay between the 2 of you. Albert Barnes put it this way, *Be satisfied with cherishing your own opinions.*<sup>8</sup> Spurgeon had this insight: *Do you feel quite sure upon such matters? Keep it within thine own bosom ... do not worry others with it.*<sup>9</sup> Keep your conviction in these areas privately; don't parade it or be pretentious or make a public spectacle of it. When by sincere faith & a correct understanding of Scripture we have a **conviction before God** that a custom, practice, or activity is worthwhile & good, we dare not declare it sinful. Nor should we allow our conscience to condemn us for exercising it. But we must be willing to gladly relinquish that freedom for the sake of a brother in Christ. Paul is clear, keep your convictions between yourself & God. This is especially important if you find yourself around other Christians whose practice doesn't match yours. Unless they're trying to force you into their point of view, you don't need to offer an opinion on the disputed point. If you do feel compelled to say something, you don't need to defend yourself or condemn them. There's nothing wrong with an honest disagreement calmly stated in love. But you must not let that disagreement destroy your unity in Christ or provoke an angry confrontation. Paul says you are **happy** or **blessed** (22) if you don't condemn yourself in any of these areas you believe God allows you to do. If you have a conviction that it's OK to do something (in an area where the Bible gives no command), then you're **blessed** to hold & follow that conviction. It shows you've thought things through biblically. You're not just following the crowd. &, you're not violating your conscience, which is our last point.

**4. When in Doubt, Throw It Out.** Paul helps us to know if our conscience bothers us or we have doubts about something, the principle is this: *when in doubt, throw it out.* **23**

The word **doubt** implies a weak brother has qualms or misgivings about the wisdom of eating or drinking or whatever the issue is. He's unsure. His conscience lacks confidence. He doesn't feel free to do this. He doesn't have the faith that all things are clean. This goes along with what Paul wrote in Acts 24:16. **I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God**

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<sup>8</sup> <https://pastorgiles.com/2015/02/10/>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.preceptaustin.org/romans\\_1420-23](http://www.preceptaustin.org/romans_1420-23)

& before men. & John adds **if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God** (1 Jn 3:21). Martin Luther said, *My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot & I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.*<sup>10</sup> Just as the strong believer commits sin by causing a weak brother to go against his own conscience, the weak brother sins & **is condemned** when, contrary to the convictions of his own faith, he ignores his conscience, & goes ahead with it. *When in doubt, leave it out!*

Vs 23 makes the broad generalization that **whatever is not from faith is sin**. Literally, **everything that is not out of faith is sin**. There are 2 views of this vs. Is this a universal truth or does it just apply to the situation Paul is addressing? Godly people fall on both sides. If it's universal, I don't know if I ever stop sinning because I'm sure I never live totally by faith. As we realize how much we fail to live by faith & thereby sin, our response must be to cling to God's grace. We are right with God only & fully based on what Jesus has done for us. So, while it's a general principle that we sin when we don't trust God, in this context I believe Paul's meaning is more focused. **Faith** here refers to a person's conviction before God in these secondary areas (22). The **sin** here is any act that doesn't match our convictions about what our Christian faith allows us to do & prohibits us from doing. Violating our conscience in these areas is sinful. Of course, we should educate our conscience through the study of God's Word. As we do so our convictions will become more conformed to the mind of God as He's revealed in Scripture. But you shouldn't go against your conscience, even if you see other Christians doing something you think is wrong or even if they tell you you're free to do it, because that isn't your conviction yet. If you act against your conscience, you're doing something you think God doesn't want you to do. You're not acting in the faith which you have as your own conviction before God. That, for you, is sin.

Since Paul repeats himself, allow me to do the same. In order to flesh this out in our families, neighborhoods, jobs, schools, & in our church, I'm going to repeat our 4 points again & give applications.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.luther.de/en/worms.html>

**1. Pursue Peace & Build Up One Another.** In every conversation, email, or text you have this week with another Christian, purposely say at least one encouraging word to the person you're speaking with. Build them up, especially if you have a difference of opinion over one of these secondary issues. Have an issue with another believer? Pursue peace & their being built up.

**2. Don't Tear Down God's Work.** Is there someone you've demolished? You've belittled, criticized, or cut them deeply with your words because they have a different opinion than you? If so, ask for forgiveness & work at restoring your relationship with them. After all, they are God's work & you don't want to hinder that!

**3. Keep Your Convictions Quiet.** When faced with an opportunity this week to express your opinion on something that's disputable, no matter how worked up you get, take a breath & say nothing. Or you could say under your breath, *Not wrong, just different.* While the convictions we hold are a private matter, the convictions we practice publicly are not. We're free to believe as our faith & conscience dictate concerning Christian liberties. But we're not free to behave only in accordance with our faith & conscience. Our behavior is governed by love as we consider the effect our conduct will have on others, & as we surrender our liberties for the good of our brothers. We are free to be quiet about our opinions on these things. After all, they're between God & us. Keep them that way.

**4. When In Doubt, Throw It Out.** Can you think of a way in which you've compromised your conscience in your beliefs or behavior? Ask God for the strength to overcome that attitude or activity. Pray to have the Spirit's wisdom & guidance & discernment in making these decisions. Every one of us has a different list of convictions concerning these secondary issues. Some will have more things on their list that are acceptable & others will have less. It doesn't matter. None will be exactly the same. Don't let these convictions destroy **the work of God**. Instead **pursue the things that make for peace**. Have you been building each other up, reinforcing each other, making each other stronger? Or have you appointed yourself the leader of the demolition team? As evangelical Christians, we don't have a great record on these things. We're prone to divide over disputable matters. For the sake of Christian unity, for the sake of our testimony to the

world, for the sake of our love for brothers in Christ, pursue the things that make for peace & the building up of one another. When we're aware of the sinful inclinations of our heart to condemn those with differing opinions, we can be equipped to believe what we believe & to believe it strongly, but still express genuine love to those who believe the very opposite. May each of us give serious thought to our convictions. May we each be fully convinced in our own minds. & may the practice of setting aside of our Christian liberties be done as to the Lord. Jesus is still building His church & we are His workmen, laborers together with Him. We have a responsibility to do the work well.

**PRAY Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all! (2 Thes 3:16).**

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<sup>i</sup>The content is arranged in a loose chiasmic format.

A: 14:5: Be fully convinced in your own mind.

B: 14:13: Don't put a stumbling block in your brother's way.

C: 14:14: Nothing (no food) is unclean.

D: 14:15: Do not destroy your brother.

E: 14:16: Don't let your good (liberty) be spoken of as evil.

F: 14:17: The kingdom of God is ... peace.

F': 14:19: Pursue the things that make for peace.

E': 14:20: Clean food becomes evil if you hurt a brother.

D': 14:20: Do not tear down the work of God.

C': 14:20: All things indeed are clean.

B': 14:21: Don't do anything by which your brother stumbles.

A': 14:22: Have your own conviction before God.