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MESSAGE: Freedom to Serve
PASSAGE: Romans 14
SPEAKER: Ryan Harmon

It was about 500 years ago that God used a pastor named Martin Luther to launch what we refer to today as the Protestant Reformation, the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther was the one who helped the church remember the importance of justification by faith and faith alone.

Now, Luther, as he considered the Christian life, decided that he thought the Christian life includes what he referred to as a great paradox. As he considered what it is for Christians to walk in freedom, he said there's a paradox involved, and he stated it this way. He said, "A Christian is a perfectly free, lord of all, subject to no one." And we like that. That's freedom. That's the way we like to think of it. But then he added, "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." And we don't like that as much. That feels like an infringement on our freedom.

We've considered the book of Romans. It has been abundantly clear that the gospel is a gospel of freedom. We are no longer subject to the [Mosaic] law. We have been freed from sin and death. But, as Roman considers freedom, it's also true that we have been freed too. We have been freed to live a life of service. We have been freed from sin so that we are free to serve. That's what we want to consider together this evening.

If you have your Bibles, open them with me to Romans chapter 14. We're going to cover the whole chapter. We have a lot of ground to cover. Now this is our twenty-second week in the book of Romans, and we're nearing the end. Now the front half of Romans, Paul was very theological, but as we turn to the back half of Romans, he's become very, very practical. He's concerned about the way the gospel impacts our life, and the way it impacts our life together, the way we interact as a people of God.

Now, last week, the focus at the end of chapter 13 was on this concept of love. We, as believers, have been freed up to live lives of genuine love. I think we can all agree that that sounds really good in theory. We like the way that sounds. But we also can admit, I think, each one of us, that sometimes it is difficult to practically live that out. Our human inclination, is to acknowledge the goodness of love, the goodness of service to others, but then often when we start to have conflict,



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when we start to disagree with others, we start to switch back to our old patterns. If we're going to be people of love, it requires the very empowerment of God by his Spirit for us to be able to live that way with one another.

Now, as we turn to chapter 14, Paul is going to talk about a very specific circumstance, a conflict that was raging within the church in Rome. So we're going to begin in verse 1. Paul says:

1 Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. 2 One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. 3 The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. 4 Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

There was a great conflict raging within the church in Rome. And it was no small conflict. It was a significant conflict, and it appears, from Paul's words, that there were two groups that were at odds with one another. The issue here in the first four verses had to do with food. Had to do with food.

Now, it's most likely that there was one group, most likely Jewish Christians, people who had been raised up in Judaism, but had come to Christ—they had accepted the gospel, but they continued to live according to some of the old dietary restrictions that were a part of their life while they were in Judaism. They still lived according to some of those restrictions. That's why Paul says they ate only vegetables.

Now, within Judaism, we know that there were very stringent parameters around meat, about how it was prepared. Is it kosher or not? And also, we know that whether or not that meat happened to be offered up to idols was a very big deal. That would make meat unclean, and therefore unfit for eating.

Now, we don't know exactly what was happening, but I think it is quite likely that this issue of whether or not meat was sacrificed to idols was first and foremost, in terms of being the cause of concern for this first group of Christians. If you went to the market and you bought meat in Rome, it would be very difficult. To know whether or not that meat happened to be sacrificed to an idol first and then brought to market. And so in the midst of that ignorance, this group that was, what I might say, obsessively cautious about this. They determined the way they would move forward is they would just simply abstain from meat. They wouldn't eat meat if they couldn't guarantee where it came from. That's how they handled it.



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Now, Paul, in referring to this group, said that they are weak in faith, and we need to talk about what that means, because that sounds derogatory to us. It's not how Paul intends it. It's important that we understand that Paul is not in any way, in the entire chapter, he's never talking about, he's never concerned about, whether someone is saved or not. This is a gathering of believers. Everyone in here is saved. They have all surrendered to Christ.

But in referring to this group as weak in faith, Paul is acknowledging that this group has not yet matured in their faith to the degree that they can experience the freedom that is theirs, or was theirs, in Christ. They had brought some of their old habits, some of their old ways of thinking, with them, and they hadn't yet come to the point that they understood and knew how to walk in that freedom. Their faith was weak. It needed to mature. So that's the first group.

Now the other group. Probably Gentile Christians. They just ate whatever. They didn't care. Didn't care where it came from. They understood the freedom that they had because of the gospel, and so they just ate. They felt that they were free. They had faith, they were free to eat all things—pass the ribs! Don't hold back. So it's a deep issue for them.

Now, it's important for us to pay attention also at the very beginning, verse 1, the way Paul categorizes this disagreement. He referred to it as an opinion. This is a matter of opinion that could also be translated “disputable matters.” In the Christian life, there are certainly things that are 100% black and white, and we do not compromise for a second on those things. The divinity of Christ. Salvation by faith alone. These are things that we don't compromise on. They are black and white, and I am quite confident that if the issue that Paul was addressing was that type of issue, he would have absolutely named it just that way.

But it's also true that in the Christian life, there are times where things are not necessarily cut and dry, they're not black and white, they fall into an area that's a little more gray. There's debate about how Christians live out their faith. And this seems, by this word “opinion,” to be one of those places.

Now, in the history of, oh, the evangelical church, even the past 100 years, I'm sure some of you can think about some of these things where Christians have disagreed about exactly what is right and what is wrong about how to live out our faith. Used to be that Christians would never go to movies. Just off limits. Wasn't necessarily they thought they'd be saved because they didn't go to a movie. It's not that. It wasn't a salvation issue. It was an obedience issue.

Then the movie “The Ten Commandments” came out. That was a problem. That's a biblical movie. What do we do? Issues like dancing. I went to a college where I had to sign a covenant that said I would not dance and I would not drink. My mom went



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to the same college. She couldn't use playing cards when she was at that college. So she played rook. That was the workaround.

We all know that there are issues within faith where there's some disagreements. Some Christians say, well, you shouldn't do that, and others say that you should, and that is exactly the kind of issue Paul is addressing here. It's important we understand that. Because I think part of what was causing trouble here in the church in Rome is that something that was a matter of opinion—debatable, disputable, non-essential—was being elevated to the category of essential. Being elevated to the category of essential. And when that happens, division is right there on the doorstep.

Now, we know that was the case here in Rome, because what was happening is that it wasn't just that there was a disagreement—it was resulting in judging and condemning and in holding one another in contempt. In contempt. One group would look at the other and say, "I'm done. You're wrong. You're not even being obedient. You're living in sin." And the other would say, "You're not living in freedom, and I think you should leave." Disunity.

And so what did Paul say? Here's the solution. He said accept one another. Accept one another. That word accept is a, in our English, is not quite as strong as the word that Paul used. It means embrace them in full and open, welcome. Full fellowship. Why? Because God has accepted them. God has accepted them. That's the first thing they need to do.

The second thing Paul said is, they need to remember—all of us need to remember, as followers of Jesus—we all answer to one person. We are all servants of one master. And ultimately, each one of us answers to him. And so who are we to judge one who is the servant of another? That's Paul's question. How on earth can we hold in judgment, hold in contempt, someone who belongs to someone else? We all belong to the Lord. We're all servants of the Lord. That's Paul's point. So he continues in verse five, different issue, he says:

5 One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

So not only were food laws in question here, I think we could just put a category as "Sabbath keeping." There was one group that felt that they should keep the Sabbath, that's what they should do, and they should keep other days as well. And so this would be the people who were bringing some of their Judaism with them into their Christian life. The Gentile group said, why would we do that? We've never practiced Sabbath. That's never been a deal to us. Why would we start doing it now? We're just going to approach every day like they're the same, and hopefully that they're all holy to the Lord. That's how we're gonna live.



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So what's Paul say? I think it's so fascinating. I'm sure both of these group groups at this moment wanted Paul to cast his vote and just say, listen, this group's right, this group is wrong. But it's so interesting that's not what he did. Instead, what did he say? Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. In other words, in these gray areas, disputable matters, non-essential becomes a matter of personal conviction. That's what it means to be fully convinced, same root word. Personal conviction.

Therefore, if you are fully convinced that it is a good practice for you to practice Sabbath, then you are fully convinced, and Paul saying, you should do so. But if you are fully convinced that it doesn't matter, then you need not do that. That's what Paul's saying here. Each person is to operate according to their conviction.

Now I will be honest with you, if I were there in Rome, I would have been a little frustrated with Paul's answer. And the reason I would have been frustrated is because this would be an issue about which I was passionate. So passionate that I was being tempted to judge or have contempt. And not only that, I like it when things are very clear and clean. I like when issues are black and white, not gray. Paul's answer, in my mind, opens the door to what feels to me like chaos. Everyone just chooses? Everyone figures out what are they convicted about? That's what it feels as though Paul is saying. He said every person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

Now, the question as we move forward is, as we consider that, these areas where we need to come to personal conviction, is there some way that we can engage in that question, engage in that process of discernment, faithfully? That's what we're gonna get to in verse 6. So Paul says:

6 He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. 7 For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; 8 for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

So when we approach these issues, these areas that are more gray, more debatable, non-essential, how do we process it? How do we move forward? How do we come to the point where we have a sense of what is right or what is wrong?

The first principle we need to keep in mind is that as we engage in this question, we don't engage in it alone. It is critical that we understand the Lord is with us, and we are to process it with him front and center the entire time. We've been set



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free, but we've been brought into a life now where we live in unceasing fellowship with the Lord. Sometimes it's important for us to remember, as we are processing things, we can bring the Lord before our mind and discuss with him. Lord, what am I to do in this issue? Do I go to the movie? Do I not go to the movie? How do I engage in this?

Now Paul gave us what I think are two great questions for us to ask ourselves when these types of areas come up. Just consider one of his statements in verse 6. So he says, he who eats does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God. So put yourself in Rome, okay, with this issue of meat, which I don't think is an issue for any of us probably, most likely. Now, if you're sitting there in Rome, here would be a question. If you choose to eat the meat, can you do so for the Lord? Now that's a little vague, but I like to imagine it this way. If Jesus were sitting right next to me, could I comfortably, confidently, joyfully just chow down on those ribs with him right there. Can I do it for the Lord? Second question, as I do it, can I offer up thanks to God? Can thanksgiving fill my heart? Can I engage in this thing that is a little gray with full gratitude to the Lord, for the gift that he has given in this thing, whatever it might be?

Those 2 questions—Can I do it for the Lord? Can I give thanks for this thing?—our great kind of diagnostic. Guiding questions that help us discern and move forward actively according to faith. As people who have been set free by the gospel, we've been set free in order to live in constant fellowship with the Lord Jesus. We've been set free to serve him, set free to walk with him. And when we enter into areas or issues or conversations or disputable matters that are non-essential—they're not black and white—Jesus must remain front and center. I have to ask him, Lord, what would you have me do in this situation? He's our master. Our freedom that we've been brought into isn't to just do whatever we want—it's to do what he wants. Jesus is Lord. He's the one that we serve. Paul continues and he kind of summarizes all this up, verse 10, he says:

10 But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11 For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." 12 So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.

So, here Paul returns to this idea that we opened the chapter with. We live before an audience of one, we are servants of the Lord. Here, we're affirming God alone is the judge. Therefore, we have no right to judge anyone else. Certainly not within the family of God. But more than that, Paul's using this idea of God as judge as a motivation. Each of us will be called to give an account before the Lord one day.



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Now, we have talked about this day of judgment a number of times. It's very important that what we are not talking about here is whether or not we will hear from the Lord in that day that we are with him and are able to enter into his joy or whether we are destined for hell. That's not the judgment we're talking about. This isn't an issue of salvation. We already know as believers, because of the work of the cross, because of the merits of Jesus Christ, we have already received that future declaration, that future judgment, right now. We have been justified, declared righteous, because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. We can be absolutely confident. That is not what Paul's talking about.

What he is talking about, however, is that each one of us will give an account for how we have stewarded the grace that God has given to us, how we walked with the Lord. How have we sought to love him and love our neighbor? How have we walked through disputable matters? How have we walked through disagreement? Has our heart been filled with judgment and contempt or has our heart been filled with love? These aren't issues, this isn't a judgment that we fear, in terms of salvation. This is a moment where we will be held accountable to the one whom we serve. Scripture makes it very clear that day is coming. That day is coming.

So in light of that day, Paul uses this as motivation, and the question is, how then shall we live? And he says in verse 13:

13 Therefore, let us not judge one another anymore [it was happening, but let's put an end to it], but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.

I might say it like this. Let's put away judgment and condemnation, and instead as believers, let's do our best to help one another in this walk of faith. To join together. To help one another pursue God. To not put a stumbling block—something that might trip another believer up, a brother and sister in Christ—up. Let us not do that. Let us seek to help one another, seek what is good for one another.

Now, what exactly might it look like to put a stumbling block in someone's way? Paul's going to get to that when we get to verse 15. But before he does, we just want to continue on and Paul's going to let us know where exactly he stands on these matters. Even though Paul's calling these things a matter of conscience, for example, with food or with Sabbath keeping, Paul wants to make it abundantly clear that in Christ, we have been set free from those things. So he tells us just that in verse 14. He says:

14 I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.



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When it comes to matters of food, Paul clearly identifies with the Gentile Christians. He understands it's all clean. I don't need to live any longer, fearful of whether or not this meat was sacrificed to an idol or not. Don't have to be afraid of that. It's all clean. I can walk in that freedom. That's clearly what Paul is affirming. That's how he himself lived. That's ultimately what I think he would say a mature or a strong faith frees us up to do.

But then he adds the second part of verse 14 that is a little more difficult. He says that if someone is convicted that certain food is unclean, then for that person, it's unclean. It's a matter of conscience. That's this idea once again. I find this challenging, I'll just be honest with you. Because we know—I mean, Jesus had to make it abundantly clear to Peter, remember he had to give Peter a vision. “Peter, don't call unclean that which I have made clean.” You can eat whatever.

Now, we also know it was still a struggle for Peter. He still carried some of that residue, some of the vestiges of his old way of life in Judaism with him. It took time for him to enter into that, especially when he was around fellow Jews. But we know that all things have been made clean. But Paul clearly is saying here, there are times where one is not yet fully convinced of that freedom. And for that person in that moment, their conscience does not yet allow them to step into that freedom, even though it exists. Even though it exists.

So now, how do we handle that with one another? What do we do? And now here Paul gives those who are, let's call it strong in faith, those who believe they are free, he gives us very radical call for how we are to operate in these matters in our life together. Verse 15, he says:

15 For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.

That's a challenging verse. Let me explain. What Paul's saying is that if, like him, someone agrees that all food is clean, there's no need to eat only vegetables. You don't need to worry about it. Paul is saying, for the sake of love, for the sake of concern, for the weaker brother or sister, the stronger in faith should be willing to set aside some of their rights, some of their freedoms, for the sake of those who are weaker. That's what he's saying. In that moment, if I'm the meat eater, I should not demand, absolutely say, “I am free, and I don't care if you don't think I am.” I shouldn't demand the expression of my freedom in that moment, because what should prevail is my love for the weaker brother or sister.

Now that is, I think we can admit, that's very challenging. Very challenging to us. We often think of freedom, “I can do what I want. I have been set free.” But Paul here is calling us to think a little differently about our life together. There might be



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times where it is appropriate and loving even for me to sit down, not hold on to all that I'm free to do, in order to love another person.

I could just imagine the conversation. I just imagine someone saying, "Are you saying just because this person is not ready yet to embrace all the freedom they have in Christ, are you saying I can't eat this steak?" And all I can come up with from verse 15 is that's what Paul's calling us to. It's a radical adaptation, a radical concession—not to enter into bondage, not at all. Not to think that we aren't free. We are free. But it's a concession for the sake of another. For the sake of love. And that's a challenge.

Now, we know Paul is serious about this because he uses this language that's so strong. He says, don't destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. Now to destroy is to pile up obstacles, to put things in the way of this brother or sister, causing harm to their very walk. So in this case, it would be me telling this brother or sister, "I don't care, I don't care that it's a point of conviction for you, I'm free to do it, and by the way, your discomfort is unimportant to me, and you should get over your conviction." That might be what I long for for them.

But Paul here is calling for believers to have an understanding, a care, a quality of love in their life together, that wants to see every person step into the fullness of freedom, but doesn't demand they do that at a pace that they can't handle. Challenging words. Now, as he continues, Paul reminds them what truly matters. What truly matters. What matters more than me eating the meat? Verse 16:

16 Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; 17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. 19 So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

There is no question that it is for freedom that we have been set free. Paul is not disputing that. He's told us where he stands. But he's also helping these believers see the bigger picture. Our freedom is a good thing, but if our freedom requires that we turn our back on loving another brother or sister, then it is possible, that that very freedom could be spoken of as evil, as Paul said in verse 16.

Paul's point here ultimately, is that in the community of faith, there are things that are more important than my full expression of all of my freedoms all the time. What's more important? Kingdom matters are more important. Righteousness, peace, joy in the Holy Spirit, he said. Paul's essentially saying, if my freedom in Christ is something that I truly want to walk in, I need to understand I am free to serve him. And a very tangible expression of that service is to love my brothers and sisters, to love the body of Christ.



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Now, we already named two questions that can help us navigate these gray areas. Can I do it for the Lord? Can I do it with thanksgiving? But here, I think Paul gives us a good question that we can consider when we ask ourselves, is this a moment that I should express my freedom? Is this a moment, when I know there's debate, I know there's disagreement—should I act out on my freedom in this moment? And I think the question is, does my expression of my freedom, does it make for peace? And does it build up the body of Christ? Does it edify?

See, we are a society, as a church, we are society of recovering sinners. Each one of us following the same master. And if we are to be a people who long, who aspire, to have deep community, deep love, between the members of the Church, if we are people who long to see every person, come to the point that they understand fully all the freedom they have in Christ—that's what we aspire to be—then we are people who willingly set down some of our freedoms to love. To love those who are struggling. To love those who are wrestling. The tangible way we can serve Christ is through the loving of his people, building up of his body, building up the body of Christ.

Now, as Paul concludes, he's going to reiterate all of these points one more time. So much of this chapter is very circular, so he's going to reiterate all these things for us one last time. Verse 20:

20 Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. 21 It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine [wine in this case probably also was poured out to idols, it is good not to eat meat or to drink wine], or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. 22 The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. 23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

Will we have disagreements in the church? Absolutely. Sometimes will those disagreements not be absolutely clear cut who's right and who's wrong. Will they be non-essential matters? Will they be gray areas? Absolutely. Paul's given us an outline of how we are to walk through matters just like that, that will inevitably come.

First of all, we are people who understand, first and foremost, we are servants of the Lord. We have been freed from the power of death that we might serve him and him alone. And one way that we serve him is we love one another. As we consider gray areas, we do so with him in mind, asking him, "Lord, what would you have me do in this situation?" Seeking to know whether I can enter into that for him and whether I can do it, giving him thanks for all things.



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But we're also people called, freed up, to enter into this community that God is very committed to. God is building his church. He's absolutely committed to it and he's called us to participate in it. A way that we serve him as we engage together is by loving one another, by seeking to bring peace, by building one another up. By helping those who are weak in faith not feel shame, not feel condemnation, but helping them see and become fully convinced of all the outrageous freedom that we have in Christ. It's a way that we tangibly serve the Lord.

Martin Luther said, "A Christian is perfectly free, Lord of all, subject to none." And the gospel affirms that. The gospel affirms that we have been set free. We have been set free from the restrictions of the law. We're no longer under the governance of the law. Romans has made that very clear. We've been set free from the futility of life on our own terms. We are free people. The gospel's done that.

Then he added, "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." We have been set free for a life of service to one another. We have been set free to enter into an unending life that is an entirely different kind of life, a life fully surrendered to Jesus Christ, empowered by his Spirit, growing in genuine love, and fully in service to God. As we do that, as we serve him in this way, he is faithful. And he will build up his community, his people. And we together, we'll become a people that reflect him more and more. Which is exactly his plan. He does it for his glory. He makes us into people of genuine love. Let's pray about these things together.

Our Father, we do thank you. We thank you that you have been so clear on so many things. You have been clear we are free because of the cross. And we are now free to live life with you, unending life now and forever in service to the King of kings. Lord, as we seek to live together, we will admit to you we sometimes can get caught up on things that we make more important than they need to be. Lord, when that happens, help us not to judge, help us not to condemn—help us to love, Lord. And ultimately, we ask that you will help each one of us walk fully in the freedom that is available to us in and because of the gospel. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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