

THE STRONG BELIEVER AND THE WEAK BELIEVER: QUESTIONABLE FUNCTIONS AND BEHAVIOUR – CHRISTIAN LIBERTY ROMANS 14:10–23

Introduction

The issue of Christian liberty vs. license is always confronting the believer and the church who wish to please their Lord. What can a believer *do and not do* socially and personally? Can he...

- drink socially?
- attend films, and if so, are any unacceptable?
- watch television, and if so, are all programs acceptable?
- gamble, and what is considered gambling?
- dance, and is there any form of dance unacceptable?
- listen to music, and if so, what music is acceptable?
- attend or participate in athletic events on Sunday?

There are a host of social and recreational functions that are sometimes questioned by the believer who is truly seeking to please his Lord in *all that he does*. This passage deals with the principles which are to guide the believer as he faces these issues.

- I. Leave the judgment up to God (vv. 10-12).
- II. Judge only one thing: stumbling blocks (vv. 13-15).
- III. Give no occasion for criticism (vv. 16-8).
- IV. Pursue things that bring peace and edification (v. 19).
- V. Do not destroy or ruin the work of God in another person's life: it is sin to do so (v. 20).
- VI. Do nothing to cause a brother to fall (v. 21).
- VII. Watch and do not condemn yourself (vv. 22-23).

I. Romans 14:10–12 Leave Judgment to God

Leave the judgment up to God.

=> Why do you judge and criticize your brother?

=> Why do you despise and look down upon your brother?

The questions are forceful and disturbing because so many believers stand guilty before God.

1. Note the word “brother.” The person being criticized and judged is a brother, and what he is doing is coming from a sincere conviction that it is either God’s will or acceptable to God (vv. 5-6). Why then do you set yourself up as God and criticize and judge him? Watch out! For “we will all stand before God’s judgment seat” (v. 10). Everyone of us will be judged *by Christ, not by each other.*
2. Every knee will bow *to Christ*, not to each other. Every tongue will confess *to God*, not to each other. None of us are God; therefore, we absolutely have no right to be judging and criticizing each other. God alone is the judge of men.

Rom 14:11 *It is written: ‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.’*

Phil 2:9-11 *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Rev 15:4 *“Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.”*

Isa 45:22-23 *“Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.*

3. Everyone will give an account of himself to God. We are not going to be called to give an account of others before God. We are going to give an account of ourselves. Each one shall be held accountable *for himself only*. God is not going to be asking us what we think or know about Stephen or Ruth. Each one will stand alone before God and give an account for his own behaviour only.

Mat 25:32 *“All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”*

John 5:22 *“Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son.”*

Acts 10:42 *He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.*

Acts 17:31 *“For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”*

Rom 2:16 *This will take place on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.*

Rom 14:10 *You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.*

1 Cor 4:5 *Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.*

2 Tim 4:1 *In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge:*

II. Romans 14: 13–15 Check Being a Stumbling Block

Judge but one thing — if you are a stumbling block to a brother. The word “stumbling block” (proskamma) means an obstacle placed in the way of someone. The word “obstacle” (skandalon) means to trap, to snare, to do something that causes a person to stumble and fall. It has reference in particular to leading or causing someone to sin. The exhortation is strong: believers are not to be criticizing and judging each other: they are to be judging themselves. Every single believer is to be constantly looking at his own life making sure...

- that he is not putting a stumbling block in his brother's path to God, not even a single obstacle or hindrance of any kind.
- that he is not doing a single thing that will cause his brother to stumble or fall into sin.

If a believer is constantly looking at his own life and guarding against becoming a stumbling block, he does not have time to judge and talk about his brother. There are three very practical behaviours that will keep us from putting stumbling blocks in our brother's walk toward God.

1. First, we must watch for the things which our brothers think are unclean. And, very simply, if some behaviour or activity is thought to be unclean, we are not to do it. Scripture gives us a great principle in these three verses, a principle that could revolutionize the behaviour of believers and much of society if we would just do what God says.

Note the words, “no food is unclean in itself.” The immediate situation of the early church was dealing with eating certain foods and keeping special holy days. However, the fact is applicable to the questionable functions faced by every generation of believers. In its pure and natural form, all of God's creation is acceptable to God. It is what man does with things that make them impure.

- => The grape is pure, but man takes it and makes an intoxicating drink out of it that damages the human body and leads to immoral behaviour.
- => Fellowship is pure; but man takes it and turns it into a loose, partying atmosphere that leads to exposure of the human body, suggestive thoughts and conversation, and immoral behaviour.

=> Vegetation and forest plants are pure, but man takes them and makes all kinds of harmful and intoxicating drugs, drinks and foods that harm the human body and lead to immoral and unjust behaviour.

The point is this: because of what man does with the things and activities of the earth, believers must watch the things which men make unclean and the things which other believers think are unclean. We must not do anything that would cause a brother to stumble.

Rom 14:13 *Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.*

Rom 14:15 *If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.*

1 Cor 8:9 *Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.*

Gal 5:9 *"A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough."*

1 John 2:10 *Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble.*

2. Second, we must walk in love toward our brother. Note:

=> We are to do nothing that would distress a brother. Imagine! We are not to cause "distress" for him — not to cause any kind of *misery or disturbance* whatsoever for him. (What an impact this would make upon churches and the world if we would live out this commandment!)

=> We are to do nothing that would destroy a brother. This is a forceful command: "Do not destroy him [me apollue]." The words mean to hurt and wound to the point of ruining. Such behaviour is absolutely forbidden of the Christian believer. We are to do absolutely nothing that would destroy or ruin our brother.

Thought 1. Imagine the judgment coming upon some because of their judging and criticizing, grumbling and divisiveness, habits and behaviour, drinking and partying. Just look at the very nature of some who are constantly causing problems and being a stumbling block for both young and old alike.

1 Cor 8:13 *Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.*

1 Cor 10:24 *Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.*

Rom 13:10 *Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.*

Rom 15:1-2 *We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbour for his good, to build him up.*

Gal 5:14 *The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”*

James 2:8 *If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbour as yourself,” you are doing right.*

3. Third, we must keep in mind that Christ died for our brother. This is the clear reason we must not distress, much less destroy, our brother: Christ died for him. The argument is forceful: if Christ loved him enough to die for him, then we must love him enough to give up a few desires and activities.

1 Cor 8:11 *So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.*

2 Cor 5:15 *And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*

Col 1:21-22 *Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*

III. Romans 14:16–18 Christian Liberty vs. License

Give no occasion for criticism. Christian liberty can be abused. A believer may be free to eat and drink some things and be free to go and participate in certain activities, but he *should not* do either. Why? Because his behaviour would be considered evil. Two facts are to be kept in mind by believers when they are considering questionable things.

1. The Kingdom of God is the believer’s concern, not pleasure. Note: the Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking; that is, it is not concerned with external matters but with the heart. It is not a sin to abstain from food and drink and questionable activities; therefore, the believer must readily stay away from anything that will distress or cause others to stumble. The Kingdom of God is...
 - righteousness: being and doing what is right; establishing and maintaining the highest possible good with God and man.
 - peace: being in a right relationship with both God and man and maintaining that relationship; working for the highest possible good between God and man.
 - joy: experiencing the fulfilment and happiness of a right relationship with God and man; bearing the fruit of being right with God and man.

The point is this: the believer is to be concerned with people and their relationships with God and with himself, not with the right to eat, drink and socialize. His primary purpose in life is to reach and build men up, not to distress and cause them to stumble.

2. The believer who puts the spiritual welfare of people before his own desires pleases both God and men. Note a crucial point: this is the person who is *acceptable* to Christ,

the person who is a *genuine believer*. A man who professes to know God makes a questionable profession...

- if he does not love God enough to do what He says.
- if he does not love his brother and fellow man enough to keep from grieving and causing him to stumble.

Mat 7:21 *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”*

Mark 7:6 *He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites: as it is written: ‘These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.’”*

John 14:21 *“Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.”*

Titus 1:16 *They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.*

Note another fact: the believer who seeks the welfare of his brothers will be acceptable to men.

2 Cor 10:18 *For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.*

1 Tim 4:12 *Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.*

Prov 22:1 *A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.*

Eccl 7:1 *A good name is better than fine perfume.*

IV. Romans 14:19 Purpose of Believers

Pursue things that bring peace and edification. This is the very purpose for believers being on earth: to bring peace to men and to build them up. Men must secure peace with God and with each other and they must be built up in Christ. Believers have both the message of peace and of growth; therefore, they must *follow only* those things which will make peace and edify men.

Rom 12:18 *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

Heb 12:14 *Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.*

1 Cor 8:1 *Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*

Rom 15:2 *Each of us should please his neighbour for his good, to build him up.*

1 Cor 14:26 *All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.*

2 Cor 12:19 *Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.*

Eph 4:29 *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.*

V. Romans 14:20 Ruining the Work of God in a Believer

Do not destroy or ruin the work of God in another person's life — it is sin to do so. A person, child or adult, is far more important than having the right to eat and drink certain things and to attend and participate in certain social and recreational activities.

Mat 18:6 *“But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”*

1 Cor 8:13 *Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.*

Gal 5:13 *You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.*

Phil 2:4 *Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

1 Pet 2:16 *Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.*

VI. Romans 14:21 Causing a Brother to Fall

Do nothing to cause a brother to fall. Note how clearly Scripture speaks: food, wine — nothing — is worth causing a brother, child or adult, to fall. What is right for one may be the downfall of another, for men do influence children and other adults; the fact is not debatable. The weak person, whether child or adult, may do something...

- because everyone else is doing it.
- because he does not wish to go against the crowd.
- because he simply does not wish to be different.
- because he does not wish to be criticized or ridiculed or unpopular.
- because he is weaker in stamina.
- because he looks up to and idolizes his friends (parents).

Acts 20:35 *In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*

Rom 14:1 *Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.*

Rom 15:1 *We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.*

1 Cor 8:9 *Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.*

1 Cor 8:11 *So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.*

1 Cor 9:22 *To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.*

1 Cor 10:24 *Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.*

Phil 2:4 *Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

VII. Romans 14:22–23 Self-Condensation

Watch — do not condemn yourself. There are three ways a believer can keep from condemning himself.

1. By keeping his faith. *Faith* means the belief that a person can do a certain thing and that it is acceptable to God. If a believer feels free to do a certain thing, then he can do it, but it is to be done in *private before God*. It is not to be paraded publicly and done before men. It is to be eaten and drunk and done only in private. Doing the thing privately and *offering it up to God with thanksgiving* are the only ways it is acceptable. *If it cannot be offered up to God with thanksgiving, then it should not be done.*
2. By not going against his conscience. The believer must not condemn himself in what he does and allows in his life and home. (Remember: the children and the wife or husband are being influenced by what the believer does.)
3. By acting on faith, from a conviction that God approves the activity. If there is any question, note how clearly and forcibly Scripture speaks: "Everything that does not come from faith is sin." If a believer cannot eat, drink, and do the thing *in faith* — knowing it is acceptable to God — then *doing it is sin*.

Heb 11:6 *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*

James 4:17 Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

Prov 14:21 He who despises his neighbour sins, but blessed is he who is kind to the needy.

Prov 24:9 The schemes of folly are sin. ■