

Chapter Twenty-three

Stumbling Block or Stepping Stone

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the Law; ye are fallen from grace” (Galatians 5:1, 4).

If there was anything that Paul was dead set against, and would not tolerate for one single moment, it was being placed back under the law from which he had been delivered by the grace of God. He insisted that he was leading the life of victory in Christ. His life was no more governed by the demands of the Law, but the constraining power of the love of Christ. He says in 1 Corinthians:

“All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not”
(1 Corinthians 10:23).

“I am not under the Law,” says Paul. *“All things are lawful for me.”* Four times in this one epistle he makes that statement – *“All things are lawful to me.”* Paul says, *“As far as the Law is concerned, I am free.”* Now don't misunderstand this statement. Paul was not free to do as he pleased, but he was free to please God. The Law of love has no limitations. It does more than the Law of commandments ever required.

What Is This Liberty

This liberty has its definite responsibilities. We cannot exercise our liberty without considering others besides ourselves. There may be things in our lives that are entirely innocent, that we feel at liberty to enjoy, and against which there is no prohibition in the word of God. Yet this liberty of ours may become a sin, if we fail to seriously consider its effect upon others. As an example, we take Paul who said, *“All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient.”* The particular question Paul refers to, involved the eating of certain foods. Some of the believers had no guilty conscience about buying and eating legally unclean foods, foods offered to idols, or dining in a pagan temple. But some did not agree with Paul, and thought it was wrong to eat foods prohibited by the Law of Moses, and to patronize a heathen temple.

Probably the fact that the church at Corinth consisted of both Jews and Gentiles accentuated this disagreement. The distinction between clean and unclean meats had for centuries been an effective barrier to fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. That wall of partition was done away in Christ, but all the Christians were not fully aware of this liberty. The Gentile Christians in Corinth would see no hard in eating legally unclean foods, but for the Christian Jews it was not so easy, after living for centuries under the Law. The difference became a real source of controversy. What was right? Was it right or wrong to eat legally unclean means or even clean meats previously offered to idols, and to sit among pagans in an idol's temple to eat?

Paul's Answer

Paul's answer is one that must still be learned by many Christians. He says that as far as he is concerned, he can see no harm in purchasing and buying this meat in an idol's temple. We are not under Law, but grace. This meat was probably of far superior quality because only the best was accepted for sacrifice to idols. After the pagan priest had accepted this sacrificial meat, it was then put on sale or served at meals in the temple restaurant. It could probably be bought very reasonably because it had cost the priests nothing. It was given as an offering. Why not take advantage of this saving? However, if you feel it is wrong, don't eat it, says Paul. It really makes no difference. Listen to Paul's words:

"But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat [that is, these meats offered to idols], are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse" (1 Corinthians 8:8).

Let every man be persuaded in his own mind. But as for me, says Paul,

"All things are lawful for me...Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no question for conscience sake...If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go; whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience sake" (1 Corinthians 10:23, 25).

Here then is the answer. We are not under legal restraint – we have perfect liberty. Paul says in Romans 14:14,

"I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself" (Romans 14:14).

But! But! But!

But this is only half the story. If this liberty of ours becomes a stumblingblock to other sensitive, critical believers who think it is wrong, then our insistence upon our liberty becomes a sin. The natural tendency is to defend our liberty, and we are tempted to say something like, *"It's none of your business what I do! My conscience does not forbid me to do this, I am not under law, but live in the liberty of grace and you have no right to sit in judgment upon me."* This, says Paul, is making our liberty under grace a sin against our brother. For, while we are not under the Law of commandments, we are under the law of love and consideration toward others. Listen to Paul. He says, *"You may have a perfectly clear conscience in regard to this matter of meats offered to idols, **but**,*

"...there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled" (1 Corinthians 8:7

There were those, who because of early training or national background, were much opposed to these unclean meats and were terribly offended by those who, like Paul saw no harm in it. For the sake of these "weak" brethren who are offended by our liberty, we should be willing to forgo and give up our liberty, lest we cause them to be

offended, or encourage them to take the same liberty *against their own conscience*. In other words, “If you see no harm in it, go ahead and eat it, but if you think it is wrong, don’t do it,” for . . .

“...meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse”

(1 Corinthians 8:8).

Well, you might say, that settles it. It’s very simple; let each one do as he pleases, for we are not under the Law but under grace. But it really isn’t *that* simple, for another law should govern our conduct – the law of love! This law should work both ways. It is a two-way street. First, those who feel that what they are doing is not displeasing to God, have the liberty to do so. But if it offends a *weaker* brother, the *law of love* should make us willing to sacrifice our liberty, and refrain from anything that would cause another to stumble.

Second, those who do not agree with the liberties that some Christians enjoy should not sit in judgment or condemn them just because they do not see eye to eye. Let me say, “*If the teaching of the Word in this matter were practiced 95 per cent of church troubles could be solved without serious disagreement.*” There are two prongs to this weapon. They are both clearly state in Romans 14:13 ---

“Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way” (Romans 14:13).

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if these instructions could be followed by all of us! First if we would refrain from sitting in judgment upon a brother’s liberty in Christ. If we feel that our brother is doing things that we think are wrong, then don’t do them, but don’t condemn our brother. Surely anyone who is sincere and honest in his search for truth realizes that this, of course, never applies to those things that are strictly forbidden in the Bible, but I am referring to matters whereon the Bible is silent and each one must decide for himself. So, our determination must be, by God’s grace, “*I will not sit in judgment upon my brother's honest convictions of conduct.*” And now comes the other side of the story. Neither are we who feel at liberty in things that we allow, to insist upon continuing them if we know it offends a disagreeing brother. For us to say, “*I see no wrong in this,*” and then disregard what it does to another’s conscience is to make our liberty a sin and a stumblingblock.

“But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend” (1 Corinthians 8:12-13).

What an example! Personally Paul saw no harm in eating in a worldly pagan temple, and partaking of the food offered to idols. All things were lawful to him, but if his doing so became an offense to another or injured his testimony, he would gladly surrender his right for the sake of his testimony for Christ. Let us like Paul refrain from

every appearance of evil, even though it means personal sacrifice, and then on the other hand, let us refrain from judging others who may themselves not practice this grace.

“But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak” (1 Corinthians 8:9).

Just How Far Should We Go?

We can easily anticipate a question that must be answered. It is well and good to surrender our personal liberties for the sake of our testimony but how far must we carry this thing in order not to be an offense? To what extent must we sacrifice our liberty to please our neighbor and not injure their weak conscience? Some people object to the wearing of jewelry, gold rings and ornaments. Others object to innocent amusements in which we personally can see nothing wrong. There are those who object to a Christian with a pale complexion using a bit of rouge or powder; some object to articles of dress with which to adorn the temple of the Holy spirit. Some are offended by our supporting certain projects, others object to the friends we keep, the places where we eat or seek relaxation and entertainment. There are those who are offended by the use of coffee, tea, and what not. How far must we go in our efforts not to offend? That will depend on the amount of grace you have in your heart. The more grace, the less you will insist on your own liberty, and the more you will be willing to say with Paul,

“Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend”
(1 Corinthians 8:13).

On the other hand, it is equally wrong to sit in judgment upon these things in other people’s lives with which we do not agree. We may judge sin – sins that are strictly forbidden or implied in the Bible, but on these other questionable matters, mere differences of opinion, we should be gracious: (1) not to judge one another; and (2) not to indulge in practices that will injure another’s conscience. Someone just might ask, *“Yes, but how far must we carry this matter of yielding to some of these critical fault-finding saints?”* All I can advise is that this is **a matter for you to decide** – just how far to carry this principle. A safe rule is given in Romans 15,

“We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification. For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me” (Romans 15:1-3).

Having said this, we must admit even this has its limitations. There are some of God’s touchy saints who in their legal attitude are so unreasonable in their condemnation of everything we do, that they will find fault no matter what we do. There are some people whom no one can please. It is impossible to get along with them, try as we will. For these cases we need to thank God for one verse in the Bible, the words of Paul in Romans 12:18,

“If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18).

How I thank God for those words! Some folks are just impossible, and so we thank God for this word, *“As much as it is possible on your part.”*

Let me ask you, *“Are you under Law or under grace? Is your conduct one that insists on your legal rights, or its it motivated by the Law of love?”* All we need ask in any case of doubt concerning the right or wrong of a thing is, *“Does it please God, does it help or hinder my testimony, is it what Jesus would do?”* To honestly make this the test of conduct will meet the demands of the Law, for *“love is the fulfilling of the Law” (Romans 13:10).*

“Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth”
(Romans 14:22).