

## **Road Trip Devotion - Romans 14:13-23**

by Jake Christian, Adult Ministries Pastor

*“So let’s stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall.*

*I know and am convinced on the authority of the Lord Jesus that no food, in and of itself, is wrong to eat. But if someone believes it is wrong, then for that person it is wrong. And if another believer is distressed by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you eat it. Don’t let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died. Then you will not be criticized for doing something you believe is good. For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God, and others will approve of you too. So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up.*

*Don’t tear apart the work of God over what you eat. Remember, all foods are acceptable, but it is wrong to eat something if it makes another person stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else if it might cause another believer to stumble. You may believe there’s nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God. Blessed are those who don’t feel guilty for doing something they have decided is right. But if you have doubts about whether or not you should eat something, you are sinning if you go ahead and do it. For you are not following your convictions. If you do anything you believe is not right, you are sinning.” (Romans 14:13-23; NLT)*

What is Paul saying in this passage? Is he saying that sin is all subjective - that if I think something is sin, it is, but if I don’t think it is sin, then it is not? The overwhelming evidence from Paul’s other writings is that he would never say this - earlier in Romans, the same letter, he says that things like greed, hate, deception, and murder are always wrong (1:29-31).

In this passage Paul speaks specifically of food and drink - but we don’t want to minimize the importance of what he is saying. The subject of consuming certain food and drink was enormously significant in Paul’s time - both because of restrictions given to the Jews in the Mosaic Law, and because of the realities of eating food that had been dedicated or sacrificed to false gods. These were important and contentious issues. Paul’s conclusion is that there are issues on which a Christian’s course of action can take several forms - things about which the Bible does not speak clearly. On these issues, Christians can legitimately differ - and our conscience can actually determine whether or not certain actions are sinful for us.

But all of these ideas are basically the background for Paul’s discussion here. He states his point right at the beginning, in 14:13: “Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall.” Paul’s main point here is not about how sin works or what is or is not permissible in a believer’s life. His main point is about the importance of community and loving others. He tells his readers that if they believe something is permissible - and again, here we are talking about issues on which the Bible does not speak clearly - then for them, it is permissible. But if another believer holds a different view, then for that believer it would actually be a sin for them to violate their conscience. And it would equally be a sin for the first believer to practice her freedom in a way that caused the second believer to sin.

Paul wants his readers to understand that Christian community is about caring for other people and putting their needs above our own. And it is no different when it comes to the exercise of our freedom - we still need to place the needs of others above our own. And sometimes that might mean limiting ourselves and our actions for the sake of another. This is, of course, no excuse for judgmental people to hold other Christians hostage to their own personal opinions. What Paul says in Romans 14 is quite similar to his discussion of the “weaker brother” in 1 Corinthians 8. His concern is that no believer should cause the weaker brother to participate in something they believe to be wrong, which would cause them

to violate their own conscience and sin. But implicit in these passages is the need for the weaker brother to keep growing - Paul's instructions here (to the more mature believer) should not be seen as an endorsement of the weaker brother's lack of understanding. Instead, they show that a more mature believer should be sensitive to the spiritual growth of others, and do their best to help them wherever they are in their journey.

It is not immediately clear which contemporary issues apply to this discussion. Drinking alcoholic beverages? Watching R-rated movies? Listening to Kanye West or Lady Gaga? The answers to the question of application are continually being discussed and worked out in various Christian communities around the world. But what is clear is that Paul wants his readers to know that no matter the issue, their freedom should never be exercised in a way that jeopardizes some else's walk with God. Love may sometimes mean choosing to deny ourselves, even when we think it is unnecessary, for the sake of someone else.