

ROMANS 12-16: Putting Your Faith into Action

Is it OK for Christians to Drink Alcohol?

Rough Transcript

Brett Clemmer

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Well, hey guys. Welcome to the Man in the Mirror Bible Study. We're in part four of our series in Romans, **Putting Your Faith Into Action**, which covers Romans 12 to Romans 16. Last session, Jeremy Schurke, our Director of Mirror Labs taught on the first half of Romans chapter 14. And so in this session, we're going to finish up that chapter. So grab your Bible and turn to Romans 14.

Now, before you go any farther, I just want to say, if you have not watched or listened to last week's lesson with Jeremy, I really would encourage you to stop this one and go back on the podcast a week, or go back on the website to the previous session. You're going to want to hear that lesson. First of all, it's a great lead-in for what we're going to talk about in this session. And then secondly, Jeremy just did an excellent job. We're really happy to have him on the team at Man in the Mirror.

So Romans 14, at the end of last session, Jeremy gave us this quote from Augustine and that quote is that "in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity". And this was sort of Augustine's way of talking about how we should get along with those around us. And this section of Romans, specifically last session, the first half of Romans 14, then this session with the second half of Romans 14, and the next session with Khayree is going to teach on Romans 15, the first part of Romans 15, they're really dealing with how do we exhibit liberty and charity as brothers in Christ. In other words, to other people in the church, how should we be treating each other in terms of liberty and charity? So we're going to look at these three points in this session. We'll go ahead and put the slide up. Now first, why Christians shouldn't judge each other. Secondly, liberty and restraint, a tale of two brothers. And then finally, two types of sin we should all be careful to avoid.

So let me start by saying that I am a recovering judgment addict. I'm a judge-aholic, especially when it comes to other Christians. There've been times when I've looked at other Christians and judge them by their theology or their lifestyle or their behavior. And maybe you have this issue too. Sometimes you look at a brother in Christ and have you ever looked at a brother in Christ and thought, well, they're not a very good Christian, they don't believe the right things or act the right way or speak the right way? Man, they're just not a very good Christian. And there's times when that judgment may be valid, like if somebody's teaching or saying something that absolutely contradicts scripture, we need to have the discernment to know that those things aren't valid and maybe even out in a situation, especially if we're trying to protect other brothers.

But I think a lot of times our judgment don't come from scripture. Our judgements come from our own personal preference or our own tradition, our own history, our upbringing. And so we're not really looking at what the scripture says and dividing the Word for ourselves. What we're really doing is we're just judging somebody as a Christian based on what we like. So let me give you an example. You might say, "Oh, those megachurch people, all they care about is fancy lights and loud music. How can anybody

worship God with all that noise going on?" Or, "Those fussy fundies, all they care about is rules and appearances. That's all those fussy fundies care about." Or, "That guy, how can he be a Christian and driving a fancy car like that and live in a huge house? I mean, Christians shouldn't be this extravagant."

And so we judge people based on their lifestyle or the church that they go to, or the branch of theology that they believe in. And it's not good, guys, but still, I have this tendency to judge other Christians by their specific beliefs or by their scruples, not because they're necessarily wrong or contradict scripture, but just because they don't sort of meet my own preference. And so this is exactly what's going on in the Roman Church, that Paul is trying to adjust. So let's turn to Romans 14, verse 10, and we'll start with why Christians shouldn't judge each other.

WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULDN'T JUDGE EACH OTHER

Paul says, starting at verse 10, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we all will stand before the judgment seat of God, as it is written. 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me and every tongue shall confess to God.' So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore, let us not pass judgment on one another, any longer."

So first let's have a quick look at the structure here, right? Paul starts out with a question, "Why do you judge each other? Why do you stand in judgment of each other? Why do you despise each other?" And then basically makes a very simple argument. And then he gives a directive at the end, sort of a conclusion. So don't judge each other. All right? So he makes it clear to these guys that what they're doing, that they're judging each other and that they shouldn't be judging each other. Why does he say that? Well, if you watched last week, there were two groups of Christians in Rome. There were Gentile Christians who came from all kinds of different backgrounds, but they weren't Jewish. And then there were the Jewish Christians.

And so each of those two groups, they had different cultural backgrounds, different religious backgrounds. Some may have lived in Rome for many generations, and some may have been new to Rome. Some may have been kicked out of Rome and then come back. And so they're bringing all of these different experiences and backgrounds into the church under this new system, this new belief system in Jesus, as the Son of God, Jesus, as the Christ, the Messiah. And so each group then was judging the other group based on how they were living the Christian life, looking at it though through the frame of their own experience and their own preferences, their own history.

And Paul points out that, you know what, it's not at the name of a Gentile Christian, or the name of a Jewish Christian, that every knee is going to bow. It's at the name of God that every knee's going to bow. The only person that we're going to confess to, is we're going to confess to the Lord at the end of our lives. Each one of us is going to have to give an account personally to God. And so Paul says, really, when you look at it this way, guys, there's really only one person that is the judge. It's God. It's nobody else, but God. He's the only judge.

That reminds me, have you ever seen those tattoos, "Only God can judge me," and obviously that's not true. We've all been judged by other people. So maybe the tattoo more appropriately would say, "Ultimately only God's judgment counts." That's kind of what Paul's saying here. It'd make a lousy tattoo. But that's what Paul is saying here. Ultimately, guys, you can judge each other, but I'm going to give you some reasons why you shouldn't here in a second, but the first one is this. When you are judging somebody, you are taking God's place. It's not a good place to be. And so he's cautioning them against that.

LIBERTY AND RESTRAINT: A TALE OF TWO BROTHERS

So Paul then goes on to give another reason that Christians shouldn't judge each other when it comes to living out their faith and it has to do with weaker and stronger brothers. So let's look at the idea of

liberty and restraint, a tale of two brothers, liberty and restraint, a tale of two brothers picking up in Romans 14 in the second half of verse 13.

"But rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know, and then persuaded in the Lord, Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it's unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good, be spoken of as evil. For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."

So how would you define the stronger brother and the weaker brother in the church? The stronger brother you might say is the one who lives a holy life, right? He diligently abstains from sinning by avoiding anything that might undermine his witness. He doesn't drink. He doesn't smoke. He doesn't swear. He's in church three times a week. He doesn't hang out with any ungodly people. And in the Roman Church, this played out in the food that you ate since there was a good chance that the meat that you could buy in the marketplace had been sacrificed to idols as part of idol worship. And then those temples to the false gods would then sell the meat in the marketplace to make money for the temple. The Jewish Christians wouldn't eat meat. And you can kind of understand that. Their thought process was probably something like, well, we don't want to be seen as supporting idol worship, as supporting false gods in any way. So we're not going to buy that meat from them.

And the Gentile Christians, they didn't see it that way, that this was just the way it had always been. They bought meat in the marketplace and some of that meat came from temples to false gods and some probably didn't and it just wasn't an issue to them. And so here you have a group of people that it's a huge issue to, and a group of people that it's not an issue to, as well. So in this situation, who do you think the stronger brother is? Well, I'll bet you that Paul blew these folks away when he said to them that those who wouldn't eat meat that may have been sacrificed to idols, those were the weaker brothers. Those were the weaker brothers. Why would he say that?

Well, Paul is just echoing the vision that Peter had in Acts when a sheet was lowered down with all the animals on it, and some of those animals had been considered unclean in Israel. And God says, "No, I made these animals. All these animals are clean. I have made them clean." And Paul says, in verse 14, "I know. And I'm persuaded in the Lord, Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself," just because someone else has a false belief. In other words, in this case idol worshipers that has no power to make the meat unclean. And Paul, as a disciple who had been with God, he was convinced in his heart that food was not unclean. Only God can make that distinction, not an idol worshiper. An idol worshiper can't make meat unclean. Only God can. And so that meat Paul said is unclean.

So you might think, well, there you go, case closed, right? We're all done. Well, not so fast, Paul says, because then he goes on to say that even though there's no food that's unclean in God's eyes, that if a person believes it's unclean, it's unclean. So while acknowledging that he knows that it's not unclean, Paul was also sort of allowing for a person's conscience to be their guide, at least in these non-essentials. So the stronger brother understands that the liberty that he has in Christ, he has that liberty, but he also understands that the weaker brother also has liberty to live according to his conscience. He wants to live in a way that he feels in his heart is appropriate to honor God. And so, even though you are the stronger brother, you don't see a problem with this meat being unclean. In your eyes only God can make the meat unclean, and it's not unclean. So to this brother, it is unclean. And so you don't want to cause him to violate his conscience, Paul says. And why?

So here's the real point he says. In verse 15, he says that if a brother will be grieved by your behavior, eating meat in this case, then you shouldn't do it in front of them. Do not destroy the one for whom Christ died, Paul says. He's implying here that putting the weaker brother in that position, you may even

influence him to go ahead and eat that meat and thus violate his conscience and thus undermine his relationship with God. And that's on you, Paul says. Man, that's pretty tough, right? And then Paul further says that your liberty in Christ, stronger brother is not the highest good. In verse 17 he says, "The Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but a matter of righteousness and peace and joy." So when you cause a brother to violate his conscience, you're undermining his righteousness. When you judge others for their conscience, you're not bringing peace and joy. You're bringing dispute and distress in the church. And so don't cause a brother to violate his conscience and don't judge a brother for his conscience.

And so that brings us to our Big Idea for today. **I should never allow my liberty to cause a brother to violate his conscience.** I should never allow my liberty to cause a brother to violate his conscience. Not only do you potentially destroy the brother, Paul says, but he goes on to say, you can even destroy the work of God. And this is the church. So our guide for action then, according to verse 19 is to pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding, it says in the ESV, or building each other up. So that's what we should pursue. We shouldn't pursue like being right. We shouldn't pursue like convincing somebody that we have these liberties, that it's okay to do this or that, that they don't think is right. Instead, what we should do is we should pursue peace. We should pursue building each other up. So don't cause a brother to violate his conscience. Don't judge a brother if his conscience puts restrictions on him, that your conscience doesn't, if it's not specifically something that's forbidden or allowed by scripture.

TWO SINS TO AVOID

So Paul ends this section then, this part of Romans with a reminder that a man's faith and beliefs are between him and God. And as a result then, there are two sins that we must avoid. Starting in verse 20, read with me, "Do not for the sake of food, destroy the work of God." That's the church. "Everything is indeed clean, but it's wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. For whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin."

So here are the two sins to avoid. One, for the stronger brother. One, for the weaker brother. For the stronger brother, don't cause a brother to stumble. He says, it's wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It's not good to eat meat or drink wine if that causes your brother to stumble. And then he says, your faith is between you and God. Like God's going to convict you of the things that he wants you to do and the things that he doesn't want you to do. So just keep that between you and God. You don't need to impose your liberty or impose your beliefs on another brother in these areas like this.

And then for the weaker brother, he says equally emphatically, don't violate your conscience just because you see other brothers doing things that you're not comfortable with. And this is his conclusion. Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. You don't want to be convicted in your own heart of doing something that you, according to your conscience feel is wrong, Paul says.

So what does that look like today? Well, one example that really strikes me today in the church, it has to do with alcohol. And that's kind of why we titled this session, Is it okay for a Christian to drink alcohol? And there's brothers who don't believe alcohol in moderation undermines their faith in any way. They don't think it undermines their relationship with God in any way. They enjoy having a glass of wine with dinner or having a drink with some friends. They may even cite Psalm 104:15 that says that God made wine that gladdens men's hearts, right? But then there's other brothers who, as a matter of conscience, believe that they shouldn't partake in alcohol. It's not something that they should drink at all. They never want their mind to be clouded. They don't want to be a poor example to others around them.

They may even cite Proverbs 20 verse 1 that says that wine is a mocker and strong drink is a brawler. And those led astray by them are unwise.

So Paul's point here is not that one is right and the other is wrong. But what he's saying is behave in a way that promotes peace and building each other up. So if you're among brothers and you enjoy a glass of wine or a Guinness, and everybody in that group feels the same way, you might go ahead and follow your conscience and say, yeah, it's okay to have a drink with my friends. But if there's a brother there who really believes that it's wrong, who according to his own conscience, it's going to undermine his faith, especially think about this, especially if he decides to violate his conscience to try to fit in, well, then you need to abstain in that situation. You need to say, you know what, I'm just going to have a ginger ale or a water. I don't need to participate in this for the sake of my brother. And then think about it this way. What if that brother has had an issue with abusing alcohol in his past, that you may know about, or you might not even know that's why he doesn't drink.

And so when you can come alongside that brother, you are pursuing peace. You are building each other up and think about it. If you have a brother who's had an alcohol problem in the past, and he's among a bunch of Christian guys, and they start popping open bottles of beer, and now he feels like, well, if I don't have one, I'm not going to fit in. Well, no, you can be the stronger brother for him. You can come alongside of him and say, "Here, you want a ginger ale? I'm going to get a ginger ale too." Or, "You want a soda? I'm going to get a soda too." And you can provide strength to that brother. That's what it means to build each other up. That's what it means to pursue peace.

So remember our Big Idea. **I should never allow my liberty to cause a brother to violate his conscience.** So let me give you one final word to wrap this up. And that word is love. Augustine's famous quote ends, "In all things charity," but you could easily substitute the word love for charity. In modern language, it probably captures the meaning of what Augustine was saying a little bit better. And you remember John 13:34 and 35, Jesus has washed the disciples feet. And then a little bit later, he says this, "A new command I give you. Love one another. As I have loved you, you must love one another. By this, everyone will know that you're my disciples, if you love one another." Love, love, love, love four times in two verses Jesus is emphasizing this. And guys, when it comes to liberty versus conscience, versus convictions, how should you act? You should act in a way that your brother knows that you love him and that you want to take care of him, that you don't want him to violate his conscience, that you don't want to undermine his relationship with God.

So thinking back once more to Jeremy's lesson from last week, I remember he said, "As men, we need to be willing to die to ourselves." And when you have a belief that you have liberty and you choose not to exercise that liberty for the sake of your brother, that's dying to yourself a little bit. And let's be honest, sacrificing your freedom in one situation to help your brother be true to his conscience, that's not much of a sacrifice. It's not a sacrifice. It's just love. Let's pray.

Well, Father, thank you, again, for your word, for the power of Paul's teaching, for his desire to see the church in Rome unified, for brothers to take care of each other, to allow for each other's weaknesses, to pursue peace and mutual building each other up. Lord, would you help us to pursue those things, Father, in the church with our brothers that we would pursue love and joy and righteousness in all of our relationships, that we would never, Father, allow our liberty to cause a brother to violate his conscience. Lord, we love you. Help us to follow you closely and help us to live out your love for us as we live amongst our brothers and sisters in Christ. In Jesus name, we pray. Amen. Thanks, guys.