

To begin with today, I want to take you back to 1st century Rome – a place that had every right to claim to be, “the centre of the world”, after all, it **is** the power base of the mighty Roman empire..

And I feel I **want** to describe it as being “a Godless place”, but it’s a bit hard to do that, because Rome was **obsessed** with all sorts of gods... Even the Emperor himself, was considered to be “a god”....

And I want you to imagine, that from your childhood (as a little Roman boy or girl), you’ve been right into this whole idolatry thing. Every time you go to the butcher to get some meat, he’ll up-sell it, by recounting the story of how it was sacrificed to the gods: “*Oh yes today we have some very nice rib fillet - sacrificed to Jupiter it was... You’re lucky you didn’t come in yesterday – the offering was to Neptune, and it’s still soaking in the brine...*”

And when you sit down to dinner, your parents would tell you how this is **your** worship of the gods – **you** share in the sacrifice by eating the meat....

And you grew from an idolatrous child, in an idolatrous Roman family, to having your **own** home, and your **own** gods and your own sacrifices....

But then something happened, that changed your life: You heard the Gospel. And the Lord opened your eyes to the utter foolishness of what you’ve been doing. And so you’ve burnt your idols, and destroyed their altars.

But your conscience troubles you. Every time you look down at your dinner plate, and your roast meat is there, swimming in blood, to honour the gods... And when you eat with your non-Christian friends, and they say a little prayer of thanks to their household gods before the meal, you just can't do it anymore. You just **can't**....

And as much as you love meat, every time it gets dished up on your plate, your conscience just won't let you eat it, because to you, it's a form of worshipping false Gods. And you've repented of this, because now you're committed to Christ..

And because meat that has **not** been dedicated to the gods, is almost impossible to find, you don't eat meat at all any more....

But when you get together as a church (for a church dinner), there are others there who don't seem to be quite as troubled by it all as what you are. And they say to you, "Your faith is too weak". "Don't you know, Jesus Christ is bigger than this... His blood has overcome any bonds that you have to any false gods... You're free to eat whatever meat you like. And if you **don't** eat the meat, well that just proves to us that your faith is weak"...

But your conscience is so troubled by it. And not only that – you're troubled for them. If it feels so wrong for you, it **can't** be right for them either, can it???. They shouldn't be doing it either...

And the fellowship of Christ, is in trouble. It's in a state of disagreement, and it's tearing itself apart, over a matter of

religious conduct. “Am I allowed to eat meat? Or am I not? Are **you** allowed to eat meat? Or are you not?”

Now I want to take you to a **Jewish** family, in that same city of Rome. And since you were a child, you’ve been taught to have nothing to do with meat sacrificed to idols. It is unclean. And you would **never** eat something like pork, **or** meat that still has the blood in it (because the animal was strangled)...

And then there’s the Sabbath. What separates you from those around you, is your adherence to the Sabbath. And it’s been drummed in to you, “This is what we do. This is who we are. This is how we honour God. This is our identity – it’s what sets us apart as God’s people.”

But then you too, heard about the Messiah – the Christ – the Son of God. And you’ve come to faith, and you’ve joined the church. And you know in your head, what the Apostles have taught, about how all the old cleanliness laws of the Law of Moses don’t apply to you any more... You know in your head that Christ has set you free from all of this “religious observance”, but your heart still feels “It’s wrong”... You feel crook-in-the-guts at the mere **thought** of eating non-kosher food; Your conscience troubles you so much, that you could never work on the Sabbath...

And you go to church, and the same thing happens to you – there’s these ‘super-Christians’ who seem so ‘full of beans’, but they’re not – they’re full of meat – and they’re telling you the same thing – “Your faith is too weak”. “You need to be like us... You just need to leave all of that religious stuff behind – that’s all legalism.”

But **you** feel that **they're** the ones, who are on the wrong track... After all, you're a Jew. Jesus was a Jew. Shouldn't they stick to the Jewish practices if they want to worship the Jewish Messiah????

And once again, the fellowship is in very real trouble – all over a matter of what people eat and drink.

Does that help you at all, to understand what Paul is talking about in Romans Chapter 14?

He's saying, "It's **true**. Christ **has** set us free from the cleanliness regulations, and we **are** free to eat whatever food we like."

But the key message is: "Don't let your freedom upset your brother or sister in Christ."

If your faith is strong. Fine. Eat your meat... But **don't** insist that everybody else has to eat it as well... And not only that, if you can see that when you're eating meat in front of your brother or sister in Christ, it's upsetting them, well "Why would you do it?" Don't you think it's more important to maintain the unity of the church, than it is for you to have a feed of steak?...

And likewise, If you're troubled by eating meat (because it may have been sacrificed to an idol) well **don't** eat it... But don't you then, go getting up everybody else because they are eating it (they're free to do that)...

So:

- The strong are not to despise the weak; and
- The weak are not to judge the strong....

So, I've brought some good news to you today: "You are allowed to eat meat"...

In the words of the wise sage "Homer Simpson", "A child's life is at stake... -hmmm Steak..."

You are allowed to eat meat, whether it's been sacrificed to false gods or not. But if your conscience troubles you, don't eat it...

Now, isn't that a life-changing message??? Aren't you glad you came to church today and that's all sorted out for you???? Short sermon and BBQ for lunch...

Really????

What relevance does **any** of this have, to a bunch of Christians, out in the bush in southern Qld? Are we carnivores or herbivores here? Put your hand up if you eat meat. Put your hand up if you will not eat meat, because you suspect it's been sacrificed to a false god.

I sorta suspected that'd be the case. We don't even have a local slaughter house here, do we? – never lone one that's been set up as a temple to the gods.... Although, a lot of the stock produced in this district, get slaughtered in accordance with halal for our Islamic neighbours...

So what's the relevance of Romans 14?

- Today I want to talk to you about "freedoms".

- What are we free to do in Christ?
- And in Christ, is there anything we're **not** free to do?
- And I'm going to talk about "How the **way** we exercise our freedoms, impacts on our brothers and sisters in Christ".

OK?

Now, from the outset, I reckon I need to define what sort of freedoms in Christ, Romans 14 is talking about, and what it's **not** talking about.

V¹³ Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

¹⁴ I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

Alright, does that mean, that provided their conscience doesn't trouble them, a Christian is free to do whatever they feel like doing? (Some would say, "Yeah, that is what it means) But let me say, "No, that is not what it means."

And when he says **let us not pass judgment on one another any longer**, does that mean we should never question the behaviour of our brother or sister in Christ? No. That's not what that means, either.

Let me be really clear here: All of this discussion in Chapter 14, is talking about “Our freedom in our religious observance” – “Our freedom in our religious conduct” (or our religious practices). It is **not** talking about a freedom of moral or ethical conduct...

It is wrong for Christians to pass judgment on one another on matters of “religious conduct”... But it is actually our **duty** to pass judgment upon our Christian brothers and sisters when it comes to moral and ethical conduct. It is our **duty**, to hold one another accountable to Godly living.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 5, he tells them, “We’re not to judge those outside of the church, but we certainly **are** to judge those who claim to be Christians. And we shouldn’t even associate with them. If they claim to be a Christian, but they’re immoral; or greedy; or an idolater; or a drunk; or a cheat – we shouldn’t even associate with them.”ⁱ

So, we are not free to do whatever we like. And we must hold one another accountable... But only on matters of moral and ethical behaviour.

So, let’s talk about “freedom”, and I’ll use a couple of examples...

Some Christians religiously keep the **Sabbath** (although they usually do it on a Sunday rather than a Saturday). That means, Sunday (to them) is a day of rest. On a Sunday you go to church, and you do no work. (*Tonga*)

As a teenager growing up in Goondiwindi, often after church, we'd go across to the Primary School tennis courts and have a bit of a bash of tennis. But we had some friends who lived just across the road from those courts, and their dad (who was the Presbyterian minister) wouldn't let them come across the road and have a hit of tennis with us. Why? Because to him, that was working on the Sabbath. And those kids were so disappointed that they couldn't join in with us.

As a Christian, you are not bound by the laws surrounding the Sabbath. You **are** free to play tennis on a Sunday. You have that freedom. You can even go chipping weeds on a Sunday if that's how you like to fill in your day. But if your conscience bothers you, you are free to **keep** the Sabbath. You are free, to have a day of rest, with no work. That sounds pretty good, doesn't it.

But the point is, "Just because **you're** convicted to keep the Sabbath, that doesn't mean that you should be putting your expectations onto everybody else"... Because just as **you** are free to **keep** a Sabbath, **they** are free **not** to keep a Sabbath.

Do you see the way it works? We are **not to quarrel over opinions**.

Here's another example: **Alcohol**. And we'll take this example a little bit further.

Is it OK for Christians to drink alcohol or not? I know **some** Christians who would say **absolutely not**. I know other Christians who would say "Of course it's OK for us to drink

alcohol.” I know other Christians who don’t see a problem with getting drunk.

So, is it OK to drink; or not?

Well, this is what I can find in the Bible:

Drinking alcohol in itself, is not a sin. The bible never makes a blanket prohibition on alcohol. But there **are** times when it **is** wrong to drink alcohol.

Drinking alcohol might not be a sin. But getting drunk, most certainly **is** a sin. In fact, in the Corinthians reading that I mentioned before, drunkenness is seen as such a serious sin, that anyone who is guilty of it, and will not repent of it, should be excommunicated from the church. And if you’re someone who doesn’t mind having a few too many at times, I would suggest that it’s time to take a good, hard look at yourself and your relationship with God, because drunkenness is no minor offence. It might be quite acceptable in our culture, but it has no place in the Kingdom of God. Drunkenness, is a serious, serious sin. And as with any sin, we won’t be forgiven, unless we repent. And repentance means being sorry enough to stop. Repentance means “recognising that this kind of behaviour is incompatible with the Kingdom of God, and therefore it’s got to go.”

But just because “drunkenness” is a sin, does not mean that “drinking alcohol” is a sin. Just like because “greed” is a sin, does not mean “having a job” and “earning money” is a sin.

In Christ, we are **free** to drink alcohol. But there are times when we are **not** free to drink alcohol. When are those times?

1. Obviously, if the laws of the land prohibit it, we are prohibited from drinking alcohol. If you're a P plater. Or a heavy vehicle driver. Or if you're visiting (or living in) a "dry" aborigine community, it would be a sin for you to drink alcohol, because the laws of the land prohibit it.

2. A second case where it would be a sin to drink alcohol, is if it is likely to lead to drunkenness. And of course that raises the question, "Where do you draw the line?" What is drunkenness? I personally (and this is just my personal view), draw the line, at the point at which it affects one's personality.:

- The point at which it makes you sleepy
- Or the point at which it loosens your tongue
- Or the point at which you aren't quite so forgiving
- Or the point at which you begin to lose your cool
- Or the point at which you have to think a little bit longer before you respond to a question
- Or the point at which – you're not thirsty – but you just want more
- Or the point at which it affects your reaction speed.

And my personal view (and you can take this or leave it), is "If in your drinking, you've got to that point (and if you're only slightly built, it may only be ½ a drink, or maybe it's 1 or 2), but if you've got to that point, you've had too much, And it is wrong to drink anymore."

3. A third case of where it would be a sin to drink alcohol, is if The Lord has specifically convicted you that you should **not** drink it. John the Baptist is a good example (as is Samson). Anyone in the Old Testament, who took a vow to God to

become a Nazirite, took a vow that they would drink no alcohol.

And many people today, believe the Lord has led them to be tea-totallers. As a Christian, they **would** be free to drink alcohol, **but** they have been convicted by the Lord, that they will **not** drink alcohol. And some have made a vow to that effect.

And if you are one of these people – if you have been convicted by the Lord not to drink alcohol, then you make sure you never drink it. V5 says ... **Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.** ... And if you have been convicted by the Lord that this is the way you are to honour Him, then honour The Lord by abstaining.

But don't you then, pass judgment on others who don't abstain. They are God's servants – who are you to judge them, when in Christ, they are free to drink. You have been convicted by God – they have not. You are abstaining as an act of faith. But if they were **forced** to abstain, and it hasn't come from faith, it would be wrong V²² **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.**

And to those who **do** drink, don't you dare brand those who don't drink, as being wowsers or legalistic. They are honouring God, in their obedience to their conviction

4. Fourthly, it would be wrong to drink alcohol, when **your** drinking is likely to cause somebody else to stumble.

And once again, these are personal ways that I apply this:

- If I'm at a function, and there is an alcoholic present (or a recovering alcoholic), I will not touch a drop of alcohol. I would rather never to drink again, then to be the cause of an alcoholic falling off the wagon. And this is the same reason I prefer to use non-alcoholic wine at communion.
- And likewise, if I'm at a party and some there are heading towards getting drunk, I won't touch another drop.

Whether we drink, or whether we don't drink, we are to do it, honouring the Lordⁱⁱ. And drinking alcohol in solidarity with those who are getting drunk, I personally feel, isn't honouring of the Lord.

5. And fifthly, it would be wrong to drink alcohol, if it was putting a strain on a relationship with a Christian brother.

Are you aware, that we have Christian brothers and sisters, who are so convicted that it is wrong to drink alcohol, it grieves them greatly, when they observe other Christians doing it. V¹⁵ 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.

Alright, are you getting this? If by drinking, you are causing your Christian brother to grieve, why would you drink?

That's not **walking in love**. Yes, we **are** free to drink, but

why would we exercise that freedom, if it's cutting up our brother?

What do you love more? Alcohol? Or loving fellowship with your Christian brother? **V²¹ It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.**

So, that's just 2 examples of how as Christians, we are free in the area of "religious practices". But our freedom must always yield to the higher calling, of the mutual upbuilding of the fellowship.

You know, we could use this same principle to help us to decide all sorts of issues:

- Having your head covered when you come to church
- Wearing make-up
- Whether it's right, for a worship leader to choose all 'heavy metal' or 'punk rock' worship songs, when the oldies in the congregation (people like me) are going to hate it. Yes, you're free to have those songs – but not if it causes your brother grief.
- Or if a Christian brother has been brought up that he has to eat fish on a Friday – Let him eat fish on Friday. But he shouldn't expect that you have to.
- Or a Christian sister might want to give up something for lent. Let her honour God, by giving something up for lent. But she shouldn't expect you to have to.
- Daily Bible reading
- The sort of clothes you wear (revealing)

In everything we do, we should do it to honour Christ, and by doing so, we gain His approval.

Take a look around you. These are your brothers and sisters in Christ. The choices we all make (in exercising our freedoms), will either build us up in love... Or they'll tear apart what God is building. (I believe God is building something beautiful here). The choices we all make (in exercising our freedoms), will either build us up in love... Or they'll tear apart what God is building.

V¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

Do you get this? The Kingdom of God, isn't about our little religious rules, and whether we keep them or not... It's about righteousness – that simply means right living. And part of this 'right living', is maintaining a fellowship of love. So, it's about righteousness; It's about peace; and it's about Joy...

How about we exercise our freedoms, in a way that builds each other up, in love; righteousness; Peace; and Joy.

I reckon I'd better stop at that. I've gone on long enough. But I will answer some questions.

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 (ESV)

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—
¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But

now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

ii ⁶ The one who observes the day, observes it in honour of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honour of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honour of the Lord and gives thanks to God.