

TURNING NEITHER “RIGHT” NOR “LEFT”

(by George Battey)

Joshua 1:7 (NKJV)

*7 Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to **the right hand** or to **the left**, that you may prosper wherever you go.*

Turning to the “right” – becoming radical; splits churches.

Turning to the “left” – becoming liberal; leads off into error, tolerating things that shouldn't be.

To keep from going right we must go left;

To keep from going left we must go right.

ILL: Driving car.

Q: How do we know when to go right or left?

R: That's what this study is all about.

ROMANS 14

Romans 14–15 was given to instruct us concerning matters of liberty

Preliminary remarks: Both Jews and Gentiles are being addressed. This is very important. The thoughts of chapter 14 spill over into chapter 15. Notice:

Romans 15:10-11 (NKJV)

10 And again he says: "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people!"

11 And again: "Praise the LORD, all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples!"

It is clear, then, that Romans 14 is not written to Jews only, but to Jews and Gentiles both.

This is important because we're going to read about eating meat and observing days and we must interpret this chapter in such a way that it includes both Jews and Gentiles.

DEFINING TERMS

Now, we need to define some key terms in this chapter:

- a) **"Faith"**
- b) **"Weak in the faith"**
- c) **"Strong in the faith"**
- d) **"Doubtful things"**

TERM #1 **"FAITH"**

Romans 14:1 (NKJV)

*1 Receive one who is weak in the **faith**, but not to disputes over doubtful things.*

"Faith" – not saving faith, but one's personal belief that what he's doing is the right thing.

Romans 14:22-23 (NKJV)

22 Do you have **faith**? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

23 But he who **doubts** is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from **faith**; for whatever is not from **faith** is sin.

“Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God” – Not saving faith. We are to speak of saving faith to all who will listen (Mt. 28:19–20; Mk. 16:15–16), but this “faith” is to be kept to one’s self.

“He who DOUBTS is condemned ... he does not eat from FAITH” – the opposite of “faith” is one who has doubts that he’s doing the right thing. This confirms the conclusion that “faith” in this chapter is not “saving faith,” but rather one’s personal confidence that what he’s doing is the right thing.

TERM #2 **“WEAK” IN THE FAITH**

“Weak in the faith” – not someone:

- *barely faithful*
- *unreliable*
- *just about to quit church*
- *new Christian*
- *a “bad” Christian*
- *a bad example*

Rather, someone who is ***overly scrupulous*** about things. Some people:

- *Refuse to eat where alcohol is served (“Pizza Hut”)*
- *Refuse to shop where alcohol is sold*
- *Refuse to watch basketball because of the immodest clothing of the players and cheerleaders*

These people are overly scrupulous; overly conscientious. Their “faith” is weak in the sense that it will not allow them to do very many things.

(Ironically, these people think they’re the “strong” ones.)

TERM #3

“STRONG” IN THE FAITH

“Strong in the faith” – not someone:

- *more spiritual*
- *dependable*
- *respected*
- *a “good” Christian*
- *someone who is a better example than others*
- *an older Christian*

Rather, someone whose conscience will allow him to do more than the other:

- *They are not bothered to eat where alcohol is served*
- *They are not bothered in shopping where alcohol is sold*
- *They are not bothered in watching basketball*

TERM #4

“DOUBTFUL THINGS”

“Disputes over doubtful things” – “*doubtful disputations*” (KJV). Things which the Bible neither *requires* nor *forbids*. These are **permissions**. These are matters of liberty.

NOTE: A “*permission*” is not *required*. It is not *forbidden*. It is permitted.

A single man who has never married before is “*permitted*” to marry an eligible girl who has never married before. He is neither required nor forbidden. He is permitted. This is a liberty.

- *Any matter **required** in the scriptures is not debatable – is not a “doubtful thing.”*
- *Any matter **forbidden** is not debatable – it is not a “doubtful thing.”*

This involves our interpretation of Bible laws.

- 1) **When God gives permission** to do something we are permitted to choose, provided that in our choices no other passage is violated.
- 2) **When God requires** something we are not at liberty to substitute anything else. *WHAT* we do and *HOW* we do it is now a *matter of obedience* – **a matter of law**.

Matthew 7:21 (NKJV)

21 “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but **he who does the will of My Father** in heaven.

Matthew 5:19 (NKJV)

19 “Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but **whoever does and teaches them**, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 7:24–25 (NKJV)

24 “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, **and does them**, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock:

25 “and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.

- a) **A matter of law** is a matter that God has either required or forbidden – either explicitly or implicitly.
- b) **A matter of permission** is a matter on which God has **neither** required nor forbidden.

Command	Matters Of Permission (Liberty)	Matters Of Law
1) Jack & the Bean–stalk: “Take the cow to town and sell her for money.”	lead the cow; ride the cow; drive the cow; (Matters of permission.)	Trade the cow for magic beans (A matter of obedience because of explicit instructions.)
2) “Baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:29)	running water; standing water; indoor water; outdoor water (Matters of permission.)	Sprinkling or pouring (A matter of obedience because of explicit instructions.)
3) Eat the communion on 1 st day of week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 11:23-25).	color of communion cloths; whether cup has handle or not; silver or glass (Matters of permission.)	1st day of week; one cup; one loaf (A matter of obedience because of explicit instructions.)

NOTE: Instructions do not have to be explicitly given. Some instructions are given implicitly. Implication is not silence.

(cf. Mt 22:31-32 where God used implication to teach the resurrection. He was not being silent about the resurrection by using implication. Implication is not silence.)

LAW

In matters of law, God wants us to have unity. That is, on those things which God has given either explicit or implicit instructions, we must be united – we must agree on these things.

John 17:21 (NKJV)

21 “**that they all may be one**, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.

1 Corinthians 1:10 (NKJV)

10 Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, **that you all speak the same thing**, and **that there be no divisions** among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

Example: Men are not allowed to have their own interpretation about the purpose of **baptism**, because God has explicitly said what baptism is for (Acts 2:38).

- *Men either believe what He said and make themselves “believers.”*
- *Or men disbelieve what He said and make themselves “unbelievers.”*

OTHER EXAMPLES: Men are not allowed to have their own interpretation about:

- a) Whether women should be preachers, because God has spoken on this matter (1 Cor 14:34–35).
- b) Miracles ending (1 Cor 13:8–10).
- c) Whether to have elders or not (1 Tim 3).
- d) Whether wives should submit to their husbands or not (Eph 5:22)
- e) Whether women should dress and act modestly (1 Tim 2:9–10).
- f) Homosexuality (1 Cor 6:9–10).
- g) Instrumental music in the church (Eph 5:19).
- h) Weekly communion (Acts 20:7).

In these matters of law we are to be:

- *conservative*
- *strict*
- *intolerant*

God has spoken on these matters.

This involves matters of law. In such matters we are to *go right; be conservative*.

PERMISSION

By contrast, God wants us to exercise tolerance in *matters of permission*. That is, on things which God has neither required nor forbidden, there must be tolerance and liberty.

Romans 14:1-4 (NIV)

1 Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.

2 One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.

3 The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.

4 Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Notice v1 carefully. We are not to pass judgment on “*disputable matters*.”

These are matters of *permission* – *liberty*. These are matters over which God neither forbade nor required. We are to have tolerance with one another over these matters.

Here are described two men:¹

- a) **“Weak in the faith”** – overly scrupulous, an overly sensitive conscience. His conscience will allow him to eat only vegetables.

He won't eat meat because it may have been used in heathen worship.

- b) **“Strong in the faith”** – his conscience is sensitive too, but not overly sensitive. He feels perfectly justified in eating any meat.

¹ Remember, these instructions were written to both Jews and Gentiles and we must strive to understand what this means to both groups.

He realizes concerning idolatrous meat that the idol is nothing (1 Cor 8:4).

Now ... what were the instructions to both the weak and strong? Notice again:

Romans 14:3-4 (NIV)

3 The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.

4 Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

The tendency in matters of opinion is for brethren to mistreat one another.

- a) *The more liberal brother tends to “look down on” the more conservative one as being ridiculous.*
- b) *The conservative brother tends to “condemn” the more liberal.*

Neither position is right.

“He will stand for the Lord is able to make him stand” – this remark makes sense only when we realize Paul is discussing matters of permission, not matters of requirement nor matters of prohibition.

(The Lord is not able to make a man who is violating divine law to “stand.”)

None of this chapter makes sense and none of these instructions will work regarding (a) *matters of requirement* or (b) *matters of prohibition*. This chapter deals with (c) *matters of permission*.

HOLY DAYS

Paul gives another example besides eating meats:

Romans 14:5-6 (NKJV)

5 One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.

6 He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.

Here are described two men again:

- a) **“Weak in the faith”** – very scrupulous, very sensitive conscience. His conscience will not allow him to observe any religious holy days. After all these holy days are “*pagan in origin*” or else *Jewish* and neither one is fit for a Christian to observe!
- b) **“Strong in the faith”** – his conscience is not as sensitive. He feels perfectly justified in participating in holy days.

He’s keeping these holy days because (a) there’s nothing inherently wrong with them and (b) he might have opportunity to convert someone to Christ.

Paul evidently kept some Gentile customs, that were not wrong within themselves, in an attempt to win some to Christ (1 Cor 9:21–23).

TWO MAJOR RULES

There are two major rules given:

Romans 14:10-13 (NKJV)

10 But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

11 For it is written: "As I live, says the LORD, Every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall confess to God."

12 So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.

13 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.

Here are two rules:

Rule #1: Both the weak and strong brethren must stop condemning and showing contempt toward on another.

These are matters of *permission* – liberty.

God is able to accept people with their opinions and judgments provided they have not violated His law.

Rule #2: No one may cast a stumbling block in his brother's way which will cause him to sin.

RULE #2 EXPLAINED

In vv14-21 Paul explains in detail what he meant by casting a stumbling block in a brother's path.

Romans 14:14-17 (NKJV)

14 I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

15 *Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.*

16 *Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil;*

17 *for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

“I am convinced ... but to him” – in matters of *permission*, some may participate with a clear conscience and some may not.

“If your brother is grieved because of your food” – does not mean a brother just doesn’t like what you’re doing. It means the brother is encouraged to commit sin. He is being encouraged by the example of another to do something he has doubts about (1 Cor 8:10-11).

The question is: *Is anyone being encouraged to violate their conscience? Are they being encouraged to do something they have doubts about?*

1 Corinthians 8 (NIV)

4 *So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.*

7 *But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.*

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

NOTE: Christians are permitted (not required nor forbidden) to eat pagan meat — provided it does not cause someone to violate their conscience!

10 *For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, won’t he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?*

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

12 *When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.*

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.

By participating in some liberties, one can cause weak brethren to fall into sin.

Therefore, if participating in a **permission** causes someone else to violate their conscience, one must refrain – after all it is a liberty and one does not have to do it.

“WINE”

Romans 14:21 (NKJV)

*21 It is good neither to eat meat nor **drink wine** nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.*

Some read this and draw the conclusion that drinking alcoholic wine is a permitted matter. They think:

- *If your conscience doesn't bother you, and*
- *If you won't cause someone else to violate their conscience, then*
- *You may drink alcoholic wine privately at home, etc.*

This is the wrong conclusion to draw for the following reasons:

- a) *The law of God commands Christians to be sober minded (1 Th 5:6–8; Titus 2:2,6; 1 Pet 1:13; 5:8).*
- b) *Drinking alcoholic wine destroys soberness (Prov 29:29–35; 31:4–7).*
- c) *According to the NT, the only legitimate use for alcoholic wine is: limited quantities for medicinal purposes (1 Tim 5:23).*
- d) *The word “wine” in the Bible sometimes means only grape juice (Isa 65:8).*

(A “winepress” is a press that squeezes out “wine” or juice from the grapes – see Isa 16:10 and Jer 48:33.)

- e) *In context, Rom 14:21 is speaking of “wine” that could be drunk by a Christian.*

- f) *Since a Christian may not drinking intoxicating wine, this must be a reference to “new wine” or grape juice.*

Q: The “wine” of Rom 14:21 can cause a brother to stumble. How can non-intoxicating grape juice do this?

R: How can meat cause a Christian to stumble? If it was used in pagan worship. In the same way, grape juice can cause a Christian to stumble if it was used in pagan worship.

Paul is referring to “*liquid libations*” which had been used in heathen worship (see Dt 32:37-38 – “drink offerings” offered to false gods). Some Christians were afraid to buy meat or grape juice because both could have been used in idolatrous worship.

We should:

- a) *neither eat meat*
- b) *nor drink grape juice*
- c) *nor do anything other thing*

that may be perfectly alright within itself, but may cause an overly scrupulous brother to violate his conscience.

A FINAL RULE

Paul now gives a final rule regarding liberties:

Romans 14:22-23 (NKJV)

*22 Do you have faith? **Have it to yourself before God.** Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.*

23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.

“Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God” – in other words, if after considering all these things:

- a) *If the word of God gives permission, and*

- b) *If your conscience does not bother you in participating in this permission, and*
- c) *If you will not be leading a weak brother astray, then*
- d) *Go ahead and participate in this permission and keep your mouth shut about it; keep your opinion to yourself!*

EXHORTATION

If one ignores the chapter division and continues reading into chapter 15, he will find a wonderful exhortation regarding the exercise of these liberties:

Romans 15:1-7 (NKJV)

1 We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves.

2 Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification.

3 For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.”

4 For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

5 Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus,

6 that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7 Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.

It appears the “strong” man must be doubly warned:

- a) *After all, these passages are discussing **permissions** that do not have to be done, and*
- b) *There is a natural tendency for men to insist on observing their liberty because why should they refrain from something that’s perfectly alright within itself?*

Disciples are exhorted to act like Christ who did not seek to please Himself.

SUMMARY

So then:

a) **In matters of requirements or prohibitions we must be:**

conservative
strict
intolerant

b) **In matters of permission we must be:**

liberal
tolerant
generous
broad-minded

Deuteronomy 5:32 (NKJV)

32 “Therefore you shall be careful to do as the LORD your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.

Passages like this are telling us two things:

a) **It is possible to become more conservative than God!**

This is why He warned His people not to turn aside to the “Right.”

When we do this we are guilty of elevating our opinions to the status of divine law!

b) **It is possible to become more liberal than God!**

Thus the warning about not turning to the “Left.”

When we do this we are guilty of lowering divine law to the status of mere opinion.

God does not want us to become more restrictive than Him, and neither does He want us to become more tolerant than Him.

REPEAT: We must be:

- a) *Conservatives in matters of requirements and prohibitions.*
- b) *Liberals in matters of permission.*

By going to the right in matters of faith and left in matters of permission, it keeps us from going astray to the right or left; keeps us on a straight course.

CONCLUSION

In closing, we must be:

- a) *Conservatives in matters of requirements and prohibitions.*
- b) *Liberals in matters of permission.*

NOTE: In our own personal lives we can be as strict and hard on ourselves as we like, but when it comes to forcing our opinions upon others, we must stop and have tolerance.

TURNING NEITHER “RIGHT” NOR “LEFT”

QUESTIONS:

- 1) How can a person avoid going to the “*right*” or to the “*left*”?
- 2) What does “*faith*” mean in Rom 14?
- 3) What is the description of a “*weak*” person in Rom 14?
- 4) What are “*doubtful things*” in this same chapter?
- 5) What spiritual lesson can we learn from *Jack and the Beanstalk*?
- 6) In what areas are we allowed to be liberal?
- 7) What are the two major rules we must go by when practicing or not practicing liberties?
- 8) Does Rom 14:21 teach that Christians may, on occasion, drink alcoholic wine for recreation?