

## **Stumbling Block or Stepping Stone?** Romans 14:13-23, 1 Corinthians 8:8-13

Adapted from: "Stop Passing Judgment," contributed by Steve Shepherd at SermonCentral.Com

In the year 1853, a six-year-old boy came home with a note from his teacher which suggested that he be taken out of school because he was "too stupid to learn." That boy was Thomas A. Edison who became one of the most prolific inventors in history, including the the phonograph the light bulb and the electrical system to run them.

Alfred Lord Tennyson's grandfather gave him 10 shillings for writing an eulogy on his grandmother. Handing it to the boy, the old man said: "*There, that is the first money you ever earned by your poetry, and take my word for it, it will be the last.*" And yet Tennyson went on to be named Poet Laureate of Great Britain and Ireland remains one of the most popular British poets to this day.

Benjamin Franklin's mother-in-law hesitated at letting her daughter marry a printer. There were already two printing offices in the United States, and she feared that the country might not be able to support a third. And yet Franklin the printer went on to become one of the most famous men in American history; through the life of his career he was a leading author, printer, political theorist, politician, postmaster, scientist, musician, inventor, statesman, and diplomat.)

How wrong we often are when it comes to sizing up people or judging them. I would say this is one of our most common human weaknesses: being quick to judge and quick to criticize, especially when we don't know the circumstances behind their actions.

John Wesley told about a man he once had little respect for because he considered him to be miserly and covetous. One day when this person contributed only a small gift to a worthy charity, Wesley openly criticized him.

After the incident, the man went to Wesley privately and told him he had been living on parsnips and water for several weeks. He explained that before his conversion, he had run up many bills. Now, by skimping on everything and buying nothing for himself he was paying off his creditors one by one. "Christ has made me an honest man," he said, "and so with all these debts to pay, I can give only a few offerings above my tithe. I must settle up with my worldly neighbors and show them what the grace of God can do in the heart of a man who was once dishonest." Wesley then apologized to the man and asked his forgiveness.

Since each of us will be accountable to God.  
Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another.

But resolve instead never to put a stumbling-block  
or hindrance in the way of another      Romans 14:12-13

The first part of this verse was last week's message: **Since each one of us individually is only accountable to God for how we live, let us firmly hold our own convictions of how to live for God, but without judging others' differing convictions.**

And now this week, Paul flips the coin over: **not only are we not to judge those who hold differing convictions, but we are to examine our own lives, not letting our freedoms in Christ become a stumbling block for their faith.**

And let me say that this has been quite a convicting portion of scripture for me to study and then try to share with you:

- First, because the Holy Spirit very quickly brought to mind four areas where my actions may have caused others to stumble (*more on which I will share with you at the close of this message*).
- And second, because I continue to struggle with the question of how to balance enjoying my freedom without causing another to stumble.

*A Bag of Tools.*

Isn't it strange that princes and kings  
And clowns that caper in sawdust rings  
And common folk like you and me  
Are the builders of eternity.  
To each is given a bag of tools,  
A shapeless mass and a book of rules;  
And each must make, ere time is flown,  
A stumbling-block or a stepping-stone.

*R. Lee Sharpe*

Which are you, a stumbling block or a stepping stone for others? Do you hinder other's faith or do you encourage people in their faith? Are you on the construction crew or the demolition team? That's the question we will struggle with today

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Imagine two people. One is born again, sincere, dedicated, loving Jesus. The other is lost, has no concern for God, has never been exposed to the Bible, and lives a worldly lifestyle. When you look at each person, what is their primary difference? Their Behavior? Their Looks? The way they talk?

Some of these things SHOULD be different, but that's not the primary difference. **The primary difference is the way they THINK.**

**Christians should think differently; see everything going on around them from a different perspective.** Remember the text, Romans 12:1-2, which is the hub around which all these following lessons spin? There, Paul wrote: in view of what

God has done for us – our salvation – the only reasonable, the only logical, way we should respond back to Him is by living a holy life that honors God. And then the second verse says:

[Christian] do not be conformed to this world,  
but **be transformed by the renewing of your minds**,  
so that you may discern what is the will of God  
what is good and acceptable and perfect.  
Romans 12:2

**In the renewing of our minds**, for the Christian, this means our entire thought process should become changed, quite opposite to that of the world. A radical change has happened on the inside and it should work its way out. Paul calls this "*setting our minds on heavenly not earthly matters*" (Colossians 3:1-2).

Before we came to faith in Christ, we believed that we were *to get all we can, can all we get, and then sit on the can*. Now we are taught as Christians, *that it is better to give than to receive and if your enemy is thirsty give him drink, if he is hungry give him food*.

"**Don't get mad, get even**" is quite different from "**Turn the other cheek**" or "*don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*." The world says, don't let anyone take advantage of you, but Jesus said go the second mile for the sake of winning them to Christ.

One of the ultimate indignities one can suffer in our society today is to be considered somebody's stepping stone. Somebody uses you in some way to springboard their climb up the ladder of success. And yet **for the Christian, it's a privilege if we can be used to help advance another Christian to the next level in their growth in the faith** (in fact that's next Sunday's third installment to this message, that we are encouraged to think of ways that we can build each other up especially the weaker Christian).

To be a stepping stone for Christ is a good thing, You can see this construction mindset both in this portion of text, *let us then pursue what makes for peace and for **mutual edification***" (which means "building each other up," 14:19), and again in chapter 15:2 *Each of us must please our neighbor for the **good purpose of building up the neighbor***. So for our neighbor, for our younger Christian, for each other, we are not to be a cause for their stumbling but rather a source of their growth (not stumbling block but a stepping stone).

Now don't miss this point: Jesus has given us marvelous freedom and liberty in His new covenant. "*Where the spirit of the Lord is there is liberty.*" "*You shall know the truth*

*and the truth shall make you free."* The old covenant, the law, is far behind us. Aren't you glad we don't have to live under the dietary restrictions and taboos that were imposed upon our Jewish forbears?

"*God has given us all things richly to enjoy.*" What freedom! But think on this: **We are PERMITTED to enjoy our freedoms in Christ, not COMMANDED to enjoy them.** In fact, the greater our spiritual maturity, the less important our 'rights' should be to us. More important to us than the exercising of our freedoms should be the consideration of how doing so or not doing so might affect the lives of believers around us. This is Paul means when he writes:

For the kingdom of God is not food and drink  
but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.  
**The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable  
to God and has human approval.**  
Romans 14:17-18

Christians are to live righteously, bringing peace and joy to others. We must recognize that we're a part of the kingdom of God as are others and it's a spiritual kingdom. **So while we have been given great liberty in Christ, our purpose is not to live for those liberties, but to live for Christ and to love others into His kingdom.**

Warren Wiersbe wrote: "*We are just like the Pharisees of old. We Christians have a way of majoring on minors. I have seen churches divided over matters that were really insignificant when compared to the vital things of the faith. I have heard of churches being split over the location of the piano in the church and serving meals on Sundays.*"

Chuck Swindoll told about a young missionary family on a mission field where they did not have any peanut butter. They loved peanut butter so they contacted some friends in the states to send them some peanut butter. Apparently, it got out to another missionary family that they had peanut butter and they were disturbed about it, thinking this family should give up their peanut butter for the cause of Christ. The situation got so petty and so bad that the young family left the mission field and came back to the states.

I know this sounds pretty extreme but Christians have often divided over just such petty issues. In seminary we were cautioned that **more churches have split over the choir or the color of the carpet than over theology.**

The point of this scripture is that as members of Christ's church we are part of a spiritual kingdom and we need to act like spiritual people by growing in righteousness, peace and joy of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual matters should far outweigh what we eat,

what we drink, and many other things. Our concern for others should outweigh our concern for our rights, privileges, freedoms.

Just because we CAN, doesn't mean we SHOULD. And remember, this passage is not talking about those things that are clearly forbidden or clearly commanded in Scripture, but rather the debatables, the gray areas; things over which Christians can sincerely hold different convictions: such as modest dress, styles of music, places you go, things you say, how you look, whether you pierce or tattoo your body, or drink, or smoke (you can finish this list with your own unique conviction).

I am sure that in the past we have all done things that may have hindered others in their faith whether we knew it or not at the time. But what Paul teaches us that if we know that our freedom will offend another believer, we should forgo that freedom at least in their presence:

Since each of us will be accountable to God.  
Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another.  
  
But resolve instead never to put a stumbling-block  
or hindrance in the way of another      Romans 14:12-13

We all need to consider what we are doing, wherever we are! People are watching us and we can hinder them or help them depending on how we live, how we act, and how we speak!

Let us then pursue what makes for peace  
and for mutual edification. Do not, for the  
sake of food, destroy the work of God.  
Romans 14:19-20

I heard this story about a pastor who began a new ministry with great excitement. Things started out well with his new church (as most do: the honeymoon phase) but it wasn't long before there was trouble in the flock. The church had a worship leader who selected the hymns for the service each week, arranged the musicians, and planned all special music programs for the church.

But this worship leader, rather than following the lead of the new guy, wanted to tell the pastor how to fit in with his preplanned music program, what sermons he should preach, etc. The worship leader wanted to control the service without any input from anyone, including the pastor.

It was almost inevitable there would be problems. Any time you have one person who wants to “run the show,” there will be problems. The worship leader went on a campaign, trying to make the new pastor look bad; trying to get him fired.

Well, you can imagine that things started going very wrong for the new pastor and for the church and for that worship leader. The worship leader finally resigned because the elders of the church believed in their pastor and backed him 100 percent. Things ended well, but for a while some fires were raging in that church causing irreparable damage; a surprising number of people were spiritually burned; even burned out.

Do you know what you’re supposed to do when a spiritual fire is raging?  
Proverbs 26:20 tells us,

“Without wood a fire goes out;  
without gossip a quarrel dies down.”  
Proverbs 26:20 NIV

If you want the fire to go out, you don’t put fuel on it! Likewise, when people stop talking and gossiping it will help to put out a fire in the church.

Just this week, **Rev. Bill Hybels**, founder and lead pastor of Willow Creek Church, one of the most influential churches in America (24,000 membership in 2011), and the man who led my wife Betty to the Lord, was planning on retiring in October after 43 years in a very successful pastorate. But instead, he announced his immediate resignation this week because of allegations had surface that he had inappropriately touched a woman (hugged her too long). It made no difference that his Session had already quietly and carefully investigated the charges and determined that they were unfounded. Nevertheless just the spreading of the rumor got ended his ministry on a sad note. Of course the news media trumpeted the rumors, but only in the text could you read that they were unfounded. Sadly for any pastor, any one in Christian ministry, under such rumors you will always thereafter be considered guilty even when found innocent. And the Devil wins; gossip and judgmentalism being two of his favorite weapons.

In the church we need to work with one another building each other up – mutually edifying one another – doing those things which lead to righteousness, peace, and joy.

For the kingdom of God is not food and drink  
but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.  
**The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable  
to God and has human approval.**  
Romans 14:17-18

which means we have to make some concessions. No one person can always have their way about everything. We must strive for peace to be at peace

[Jesus said] in me you may have peace.  
In the world you face persecution.  
But take courage; I have conquered the world!  
John 16:33

Remember this lesson from a few weeks back?

“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you,  
live at peace with everyone.”  
Romans 12:18

And here is one more for good measure....

Make every effort  
to live in peace with all everyone  
and to be holy; without holiness  
no one will see the Lord.  
Hebrews 12:14

So let's bring this lesson to a conclusion.

For the Christian, to live a transformed God-honoring life, means that we are to be living righteously – before God and humanity – working to promote peace and joy for those around us. We should be looking for ways to build each other up in the faith and wisely not letting our freedoms in Christ cause immature believers to stumble.

Because

When you sin against members of your family  
and wound their conscience when it is weak,  
**you sin against Christ**  
1 Corinthians 8:12

Now the way I have usually heard these stumbling-block texts taught, is that I should completely abstain – 100% cut out of my life – anything that I suspect might cause a weaker Christian to stumble, but I disagree. Christ called us to freedom and transformation not a different set of rules and regulations based on the weakest link.  
**so I believe these stumbling-block passages are calling us to wisdom and**

**discretion in the expression of our freedoms not complete abstinence out of fear that another's knowledge of our freedoms might cause them to stumble.**

Because There are also people in our world who are looking to be offended at another's convictions; remember the **Saturday Night Live's "Church Lady" skits?** Indeed "taking offense at another's differing convictions" has now become a cultural phenomena across America; with protesters shouting down opposing views, refusing to even let an opponent speak. And college students' fussing about "trigger words" and demanding "safe zones" so that they might be protected from even hearing any opinion other than their own; such people now even have a name: Snowflakes (afraid they might melt in the heat of an adversarial atmosphere).

- So let us combine last Sunday's lesson, on holding to your own convictions without judging another's differing convictions,
- with this Sunday's lesson in seeking to build up each other while being careful not to let your sense of freedom become a stumbling-block
- Along with another bit of Pauline advice that *if it is possible, so long as it depends on you, live peaceably with all* (Romans 12:18).

That is how we strive to live the transformed Christian life.

I told you at the start of this message that this was a difficult text for me to work through, because in the process the Holy Spirit convicted me of three or four ways that I may have offended fellow believers. So without airing my own dirty laundry, let me just say, that if a previous action or comment on my part ever offended you, please forgive me; I am still a work in progress and God is not finished with me yet.

So let's close this time with one of my favorite verses from a man who has certainly lived out both sides of it.

Above all, maintain constant love for one another,  
for love covers a multitude of sins.  
1 Peter 4.8

Let's pray about this together.