

THE ROAD OF THE RIGHTEOUS

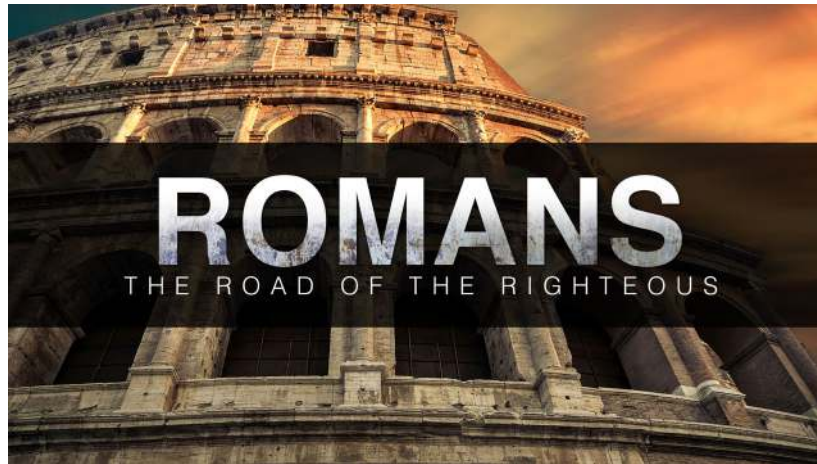
Expositional Study Of Romans

Romans 14:13-23

Written By

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Grey areas pop up sometimes at the most unusual times.

Years ago, a former student at Dallas Theological Seminary stood at an intersection in downtown Dallas waiting for the light to change so he could cross. Standing next to him was another student and friend. When the crosswalk sign changed from a red hand saying meaning “Stop” to a green “Walk,” they both headed across the intersection. As you might expect, halfway through the intersection, the red hand popped back up. At that precise moment, the two spiritual men and future pastors and leaders of congregations of saints had a decision to make. *Obey the letter of the law or flex a little.* Faced with a tough spiritual decision like this, one student walked hurriedly back from whence they came, while the other one kept walking. Although this occurred back in the early 1970s, there is a good probability the more tightly wound saint is still standing there because he never gets enough time to make it to the other side. Just a thought.

Do you think God really cares if you keep walking if you are caught in the middle of an intersection crosswalk? I doubt it. Were both men right in their decisions? Yes. Both went with what their consciences told them. The one who possessed a deep respect and desire for keeping the law (at all costs), went backward, while the other who possessed a more reasonable view of the law went forward. Even though the man who kept going chided his buddy for failing to make it from one side of the street to the other, both were within God’s will in this disputable area how a believer should response to law.

From our study of Romans 14, which addresses how believers should function in areas lacking clear and concise biblical commands, we know Paul divided all believers into two camps: (1) those who enjoyed a great liberty in their faith in grey areas, and (2) those who enjoyed a more restrictive view of debatable areas. The former Paul called “the strong,” or the mature, while the latter he classified as “the weak,” or the spiritually immature. Both existed in the church in Rome,

and they exist in our church as well. Both can, also, potentially wreak havoc on the unity of local body of believers, hence Paul spent an entire chapter developing timeless principles to help both types of believers to establish and maintain tranquility in the church. Based on this observation, it is only logical to posit the following sentence as the over-arching main theological motif of the practical passage:

God Desires Unity, Not Disunity, In Life's Grey Areas (Rom. 14:1-23)

To this point, we have covered five of this pivotal, and oft forgotten unity keys:

- *Unity Key #1: Mature saints who enjoy freedom in grey areas should accept immature saints who are more restrictive (Rom.14:1-2).* How did you fare this week? Did you (finally) accept another saint you had (pridefully) pigeonholed because you thought their faith life was too rigid and legalistic?
- *Unity Key #2: Check your attitude where non-essentials are concerned (Rom. 14:3).* Did your attitude improve this week toward saints who enjoy a life a bit too much from your perspective? Did your attitude improve toward saints who are wired for laws, rules, and regulations in their quest for holiness?
- *Unity Key #3: Judge justly, not unjustly (Rom. 14:4).* Is this principle true in your life? Are you judging other believers in areas where the Lord accepts them?
- *Unity Key #4: Let your conscience be your guide (Rom. 14:5-6).* What is your conscience telling you to do in this given grey area? Do it or don't do it?
- *Unity Key #5: Note, how you judge in the here and now will be judged in the hereafter (Rom. 14:7-12).* Are you really ready to give account to God, face to face, regarding how you have dealt with other believers in disputable areas?

As with any key, the responsibility of strong and weak saints is pick up the keys and actually use them. Are you? Will you? What's keeping you from using all of them, not just the ones which are easy for you to employ? I pray God helps you progress in your personal application with all of these keys.

Remember Euodia and Syntyche? These two ladies attended the church in Philippi and are eternally remembered for not living in harmony. How would you like your name recorded, for all time, with a plea like this from Paul:

² I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord (Phil. 4).

To Greek word “harmony” is *froneo* (φρονέω), and it literally means to “think hard about something.” ¹ Since this thinking is wedded to the Lord, Paul told them to settle their issue in

¹ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), φρονέω [φρήν] ‘engage in the process of mental activity’ – a. w. focus on mental process think 1 Cor 13:11. – b. w. focus on a line of thought or attitude think, give thought to, be interested in, be concerned about – α. non-specific, w. acc. Ac 28:22; Phil 3:15b. – β. specific, explicit or implied, w. acc. Mt 16:23; Ro 8:5; 11:20; 12:3, 16; 15:5; Gal 5:10; Phil 1:7 and freq. in Ph; Col 3:2. ὁ φρονῶν τ. ἡμέραν Κυρίῳ φρονεῖ one whose mind is on a specific day (nevertheless) has the Lord in mind Ro 14:6. ἀνεθάλετε τὸ ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ φρονεῖν your concern for me revived Phil 4:10a. τὸ αὐτὸ φ. be in agreement 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 2:2a (= τὸ ἐν φ. vs. 2b); 4:2.

relation to how Christ would most likely think about it. I've always wondered what they argued about? Don't you know it was probably something petty? It could easily have been a grey area of the faith like the color of church nursery. I met ladies like this years ago. One felt the new nursery in the new church building should be blue pastel color with no wallpaper, while another felt it should be yellow with broad wallpaper bands near the ceiling. Before the first lady and her team could decorate the nursery, the latter lady swept in on a weekend and painted it her color, coupled with her choice of wallpaper. Believe me, that shocking move in a grey area split this modern day Euodia and Syntyche friendship apart. Someone should have given them a scroll of Romans 14 so they could have worked out their issue in a disputable area.

What would they have learned? They would have bumped into all five of Paul's unity principles plus the last four detailed in verses 13 through 23. Maybe you need to bump into them as well for the sake of the body of Christ.

Unity Key #6: Don't Be A Problem For Other Saints (Rom. 14:13-15)

Paul develops this unity-building concept with this astute analysis:

¹³ Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this-- not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.

The opening conjunction, *therefore, oun* (οὖν), serves to draw Paul's entire argument thus far to a powerful, practical close. It is a rhetorical device he employs often in Romans to conclude his teaching and thinking (Rom. 2:21,26; 3:1, 9, 27, 31; 4:1, 9, 10; 5:1, 9, 18; 6:1, *et al.*, Latin *et*, and, *alii*, others). The fact a negative appears before this conjunction at the head of the sentence serves to make the request which follows most forceful: "Please, stop harshly judging each other in disputable areas." Actually, the word to judge here, *krino* (κρίνω) can mean to judge with a view of bringing condemnation.² In Paul's setting, the word is a call for strong and weak saints to stop condemning each other in areas lacking direct biblical commands. Are you guilty? As a strong saint you ridicule those wound a little tighter than you? As a weak saint, do you arrogate yourself over those who do not live as strictly and carefully as you? This type of behavior should stop, is Paul's counsel.

What should all saints focus on? Two things which are denoted by the strong adversative, *alla* (ἀλλὰ) in the second clause: Don't be an obstacle or a stumbling block to other believers, ever. The "determine" is also the word *krino*; however, in this clause Paul employs it as a play on words. Whereas saints judged each other with a view of condemnation, now Paul turns and says positively saints should make a sound judgment to live to *never* trip another saint up in their walk

²Ibid., κρίνω [etym. complex] – 1. 'make a selection', in wordplay Ro 14:5a (prefer one day above others), 5b (favor all days = treat all alike). Out of this basic sense emerge the foll. mnngs. – 2. 'subject to scrutiny and evaluation of behavior', judge, w. context suggesting extent or consequence – a. w. focus on intrinsic evaluation judge Mt 19:28; Lk 22:30; Ac 17:31; 25:9; 26:6; Ro 2:12, 16; 3:4; 1 Cor 5:12f; 2 Ti 4:1; Js 2:12; Rv 20:12f. – b. w. focus on procedural and principally pejorative aspect, mostly legal judge, pass judgment on, condemn Mt 7:1; Lk 19:22; J 3:17f; 5:22, 30; 7:24, 51; 8:15f; 12:47; 16:11; 18:31; Ac 7:7; 13:27; 23:3; Ro 2:1; 3:7; 14:13, 22; 1 Cor 10:29; 11:31 (with penalty understood); Col 2:16; Hb 13:4; Js 4:11; 5:9; Rv 6:10; 18:8; 19:2. Go to court (with), press charges Mt 5:40; 1 Cor 6:1. – 3. 'draw a conclusion', w. focus on mental processing, judge, come to a decision, decide, consider Lk 7:43; 12:57; Ac 3:13; 4:19; 13:46; 15:19; 16:4, 15; 20:16; 21:25; 26:8; 27:1; 1 Cor 2:2; 4:5; 7:37; 11:13; 2 Cor 5:14; Tit 3:12; 1 Pt 1:17. Prob. 1 Pt 4:6, in which human opinion plays a role, also belongs here.

either by your liberty or your law observance. His word choices regarding this command are excellent word pictures.

“A stumbling block” (KJV, NIV) is from the Greek *proskomma* (πρόσκομμα). Literally, it speaks of a stone placed in a path which causes people to trip. Historically, it was a coinage term, denoting the force used to forge a coin. Applied to a stumbling block it merely describes what happens when you run into it: *it forcefully levels you*.

Along these lines, Chuck Swindoll tells the sad story of a missionary family’s struggle on their first missionary assignment with other, more rigid and less flexible missionaries. The older missionaries had formulated a law concerning peanut butter because they did not have ready access to it. Their law went something like this, “Since we can’t get peanut butter, then it is spiritual to give it up for Jesus.” The new missionaries, who loved peanut butter, did not know this “spiritual” law until they started receiving shipments of the “illegal” contraband from supporters in the States. When they refused to bend to the illogical demands of the older missionaries, the latter leaders made mission life so difficult for them the young couple and their family eventually left the mission field. A petty legalistic rule unfortunately won the day when it became a stumbling block which decked the young, eager, and excited missionary family.

Folks, peanut butter is really a non-issue, isn’t it? Yet how easily some saints take a non-biblical thing and mold it into a spiritual stone other unsuspecting saints will trip all over. And what the result? The body of Christ is disunited and the kingdom work of God is curtailed. It is one thing to say you feel convicted that you should not eat peanut butter because it’s hard to get, and quite another to form it into a spiritual mandate and then judge others by it. Let me get personal with you. Are you guilty right now of being “a stone of stumbling” to another saint?

Paul’s second image is equally instructive. An “obstacle” (“occasion to fall,” KJV) is from the Greek *skandalon* (σκάνδαλον), and it literally denotes a trap, which is something designed to cage and restrict the movement of an unsuspecting animal. The peanut butter scenario was a skandalon, or a trap, in every sense of the word insofar as it caged a missionary family when there was really nothing to cage them over. Again I ask you, Are you guilty of setting traps for other saints either with your liberty or rigidity in disputable areas? If so, Paul’s counsel is clear: Stop doing that for the sake of unity! According to Paul, our Christian lives should be completely committed to refusing to do anything that would waylay, trip up, snare, or shipwreck the faith of another saint in grey areas.

Paul’s rationale for his command is articulated in the ensuing two verses:

¹⁴ I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; . . .

Hold it right here. The opening verbs “I know” and “I am convinced” are both in the perfect tense denoting a past act with an abiding result. Ostensibly, they both mean Paul’s mind was made up when it came to what constitutes something which is unclean, spiritually speaking. By making this definitive statement, Paul agreed with Christ’s teaching in Mark 7:

¹⁴ He summoned the crowd again and said to them, Hear me, all of you, and understand. ¹⁵ Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile (Mk. 7).

That which defiles is internal, not external. Hence, items like pastoral worship chairs, peanut butter, wine, tattoos and so forth are not the problem. The internal attitude attached to these items is what can defile a weak or a strong brother or sister in Christ. Hence, for Paul, meat offered

to idols in the local Roman market posed no threat to his faith and spirituality, nor could it defile him because the pagan gods were, in fact, really no gods. The Old Testament taught him this much (Jer. 10:14-15; 51:17-18; Isa. 40:18-20; 44:10-15).

However, Paul, a strong, mature believer, would not purposefully (and arrogantly) flaunt his God-given liberty to enjoy pagan meat sold at the local Roman version of Giant. He says this much in his ensuing commentary:

but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.¹⁵ For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.

I'm sure Paul had worked through how strict Jewish dietary laws related to his faith. No transition of this nature is simple and easy, is it? But he did it and grew up in the faith. Yet, he still had a compassion for those less mature saints who were still pondering how to best live out their faith in a godless culture. Even though Paul did not have an issue eating idol tainted meat, or eating any meat for that matter, he was sensitive to a weaker saint who still struggled in this area. Hence, to Paul if that weaker saint thought the meat was ceremonially unclean, meaning he should not eat it, then it was in his mind unclean.

Based on this, Paul concluded he would *never* dream of hurting the weaker brother by enjoying a good pork chop or top sirloin if his activity would cause the saint in question spiritual angst. To push one's freedom not only served to trip up other less mature saints, it would evidence the strong brother did not live with love for others on his mind, which is the essence of spiritual walking.

Last year, I had a friend and his family visit us from another state. Knowing he holds a very strict view of wine drinking for Christians, prior to his arrival Liz and I took the few bottles we have and moved them from the dining room to the basement. I could have left them out in the open for him to readily see, but that would have been inappropriate and unloving. It would have also flaunted our freedom as stronger saints, and that would have been wrong. Thus, for the sake of unity, we headed downstairs with five or six bottles of red wine. Here's another timely question for you, Where in your life do you need to stop tripping other saints up with your liberty in Christ? Likewise, where in your life are you so rigid you are ensnaring believers who are just enjoying the liberty Christ has given them? Both parties, the weak and the strong, need to always consider what loving action looks like in the given grey area.

So, Paul's counsel is clear. Where grey areas are concerned, stop tripping other saints up and stop trapping them with how you chose to live. On the other hand, always ask yourself, What does love demand in this situation.

Unity Key #7: Don't Focus On The Externals But the Internals (Rom. 14:16-18)

Here Paul lifts his teaching about grey areas to a whole other level:

¹⁶ Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing 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. ¹⁸ For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

Paul speaks here about what constitutes true kingdom living, and it has absolutely nothing to do with what you wear or don't wear, what you drink or don't drink, what you eat or don't eat and so forth. Those things are all external. Kingdom living is, ultimately, all about the internal, about what goes on in your heart and head. The late Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer puts it this way in this book *True Spirituality*:

We do not come to true spirituality or the true Christian life merely by keeping a list, but neither do we come to it merely by rejecting the list and then shrugging our shoulders and living a looser life However, eventually the Christian life and true spirituality are not to be seen as outward at all, but inward. The climax of the Ten Commandments is the Tenth Commandment in Exodus 20:17, 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, nor his maidservant nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is they neighbor's.' The commandment not to covet is an entirely inward thing.³

Yes, we are called to obey external commands; however, at the end of the day it matters greatly what is going on inside our hearts and minds. I can observe an external command and not be right in my heart when I do it. In Paul's day, a saint could acquiesce to the law sensitivities of other saints but do so with a hardened, judgmental, or angry heart. What matters, then, is what transpires in the inner man.

Paul's words here indicate the stronger saints flaunted their freedom in grey areas at the expense of the weaker saints. By so doing they jettisoned the more important interior traits of spirituality like inner righteousness, peace, and real joy which comes when the Spirit of God approves of how we are living. God's kingdom is not about enjoying Christian freedom when it comes to eating and drinking. Whereas participation in these areas is not big spiritual deal, one is not righteous when he enjoys this liberty in a grey area. Righteousness comes when you think about how your liberty is impacting those around you.

Permit me to put this in modern language.

Is it permissible for a believer to attend a non-Christian concert? Well, you say, within reason. I'd agree. You won't find me showing up at an ACDC final tour, nor one put on by Ozzy Osbourne and Judas Priest. I'll stick with Steely Dan, ZZ Top, Foreigner, Eddy Money, Styx, Santana and so forth. But could I go to an ACDC concert? Sure. It might not be the wisest place for me to be as a strong brother, especially if I run into you there. But I could go, but I would never go. For one, much of their music glorifies that which is evil. Their song *Highway to Hell* is a case in point. For another, exercising my freedom would probably be for the wrong reasons (viz., who are you to tell me what I can and cannot do), which, in turn, would not be a righteous, holy step. Far wiser to embrace an ethical stance which would bring health and wholeness to the body of Christ, instead of potentially damaging the body.

I never said the application of Paul's teaching would be easy. To follow his teaching here calls for you to constantly look at what constitutes sound and consistent kingdom living in the here and now. It calls you to look at the difference between what is externally permitted but which might not be internally prudent and then acting accordingly. At that point, you do not purchase the tickets to the questionable band, even though you are free.

³ Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1971), 6-7.

Unity Key #8: Be A Builder Not A Blaster (Rom. 14:19-20)

The peanut butter police, posing as missionaries, were blasters. Such is not the way maturing believers should ever live toward other saints. Here is how Paul puts it:

¹⁹ So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

Ah, now we are down to brass tacks. Building up saints is what all saints are to be about. There is absolutely no room for saints who think their spiritual gift is blasting, especially where grey areas are concerned.

The false apostles who denigrated Paul's ministry in Corinth are a case study of how not to behave toward other believers. According to Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 11:22, they were probably Jews. We also know from Paul's discussion in 2 Corinthians 3:7-15 that they proclaimed a legalistic righteousness based on conformity to Mosaic legislation. Translated, they placed a heavy emphasis upon a believer being obedient to the dictates of the Mosaic law. Further, everything they did in the local church body was designed to diminish Paul's leadership to the church he founded. To read 2 Corinthians is to see blasters coming up against a builder, Paul. Believe me, he minced no words in calling them out. Why? Because their activity not only tore Paul down, which is not a godly activity from so-called godly people, but it did not make for peace in the local church.

Applied to grey areas all of us should heed Paul's wise counsel. Whether you are strong or a weak saint, at the end of the day you should all be about what in your activity, or lack thereof, leads to peace and building up other saints. Does your spiritual rigidity cause peace to be sucked out of your church? If so, then you probably need to reconsider how you are behaving. Does your liberty to live large in grey areas cause consternation in the lives of the less spiritually developed? If so, then, by all means, think about what you should do to create an atmosphere of peace.

I know of a church where a young man enjoyed his freedom in Christ to wear his favorite baseball cap to church. Was he free to do so? Sure. Was he tall? Yes. Did he sit near the front, blocking the view of many worshippers behind him? Yes. Did he remove the cap when asked by leadership? No. He continued to flaunt his freedom at the expense of the peace of the body. Eventually, because he would not think of peace and building others up, his parents, who were offended leadership would dare ask their son to take his hat off during worship, left the church in a huff. Sad, but true. They should have been thinking about how to be builders, not blasters, in a grey area. It's activity like this which moved Paul to make his next statement:

²⁰ Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food (Rom. 14).

In other words, if other saints have a problem with a baseball cap blocking the view of others in worship, take it off. Don't destroy what God is doing to prove a point about your so-called freedom in Jesus.

What you going to do is the question.

Unity Key #9: Don't Knowingly Do Things In Grey Areas Which Will Bother Others (20-21)

Paul's words here logically follow what he just said:

All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense.

²¹ It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or *to do anything* by which your brother stumbles.

A child can grasp the import here of Paul's teaching. Many grey areas are a-moral, meaning that before God they are no big deal. However, if an immature saint thinks the given area, be what it may, is an issue, then it is an issue to him. Hence, since this is true, then it is wrong to enjoy your freedom in this area when he is around. Why? It has the propensity of causing him to have a spiritual issue, to stumble in this faith. What should you do, then? Abstain when they are present so they don't stumble.

A final unity key is disclosed with Paul's closing words:

Unity Key #10: Always Check Your Conscience (Rom. 14:22-23)

Paul's words here couldn't be clearer and more practical for Christian living:

²² The faith which you have, have as your own conviction 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 *his eating* is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

Verse 22 merely says, "Hey, if your conscience allows you to enjoy Christian liberty in grey areas, then enjoy!" Verse 23 states the opposite, "Hey, if your conscience bothers you about a given grey area, then don't do it for that would be sin to you." Either way, all believers should strive for peace by constantly monitoring their consciences in the various opportunities and life scenarios they find themselves engaged in.

So, if your conscience tells you to hurry back from whence you came when the signage tells you "Don't Walk," then you had better get back there. If, conversely, your conscience tells you, "You'd better get moving to the safety of the other side," God will understand why you kept moving. And while you are on your different sides of the street, never forget you are called to live toward the other person with a sense of respect and peace. No name calling across the intersection is permitted.

Love is the issue.

