Life Together #5: Don't Cause One Another to Stumble
Romans 14:13-23



Sermon Manuscript

Main Idea: Growing stronger won't happen without one another.

- Our current sermon series is called Life Together, and we're looking at some of the "one another" commands in the New Testament.
    - We're asking: What does it mean to follow Jesus… together? What does that look like in the context of our relationships?
    - We often think about following Jesus in an individualistic way. We talk about spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study as if you can only do these things by yourself.
    - And to be clear, spending time with God in individual prayer and Bible study is an incredibly sweet, intimate experience with God. It takes time, and some effort to build up that habit, but once you do, it's completely worth it.
    - So individual time with God is good and beautiful. No question about that.
    - But if we stop there, we're missing out on so much of what God has for us.
- Our passage today is going to show us that growing stronger in our faith won't happen without one another.
    - Or at least, we can't reach the abundant life God has for us if we try to hunker down, work harder, and get there on our own.
    - We need one another. The Spirit works through the people sitting around you.
- It's always been fascinating to me that in the Garden of Eden, the only time God says that something is "not good" is in Gen 2:18 - Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone…"
    - Day after day in the creation account, God calls each day "good" or "very good," but in 2:18 we see the first "not good" in the whole Bible. That's a big deal. And what's it referring to? Adam being alone.
    - Adam had everything he could want: no sin, no pain, a face-to-face relationship with God, perfect communion with nature, effortless access to free delicious food, but God said it wasn't good because Adam had to enjoy it alone.
    - He didn't have anyone like him.
    - It's a clear indicator that we need one another. We were made for community. It's good for us, even when it gets messy.
- Which we'll see in our passage today. Sometimes community is very messy.
    - Today we're asking, "How do we do life together…when we disagree?"
    - Anyone ever had a disagreement before? Even with someone you love?
    - Community can get messy. How we respond to the mess is what determines whether we grow together, or struggle alone.
- So with that in mind let's read it, pray, and dive in.
- Romans 14:13–23
    - 13 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. 15 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. 16 So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. 17 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. 19 So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. 20 Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. 21 It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. 22 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. 23 But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

1. Liberty and Conscience

- First, a little context: Let's talk about liberty and conscience.
- Put yourself in the shoes of the Roman church for a moment. It was pretty young when they received this letter. Christianity was still the new kid on the block in the ancient world.
    - So this church was made up of both ethnic Jews and ethnic Gentiles.
    - Descendants of Abraham and, everyone else.
- All the members of this church would've been first generation Christians. None of them "grew up in the church," like a lot of us did. There was no established "Christian culture."
    - They'd all left their former culture and way of life. With its practices and expectations.
    - They were figuring out this whole new way of life, together. Taking one step at a time. And clearly, there was some… tension.
- One of the biggest tensions in the Roman church, and we see it here, had to do with food and drink. Specifically meat and wine. Paul talks about this elsewhere, like in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. So this was not limited to the Roman church.
    - See, Jews grew up hearing over and over again that certain foods were forbidden for God's people.
    - Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 divide animals into "clean" and "unclean."
        - Clean animals were things like cows, sheep, goats, fish, chickens, doves…
        - Unclean animals were pigs, camels, dogs, shellfish, squid, scavenger birds…
    - This was a big deal for them because if you even touched an unclean animal, you couldn't worship God in community with other believers. You'd be isolated for a while. And remember it's not good for man to be alone.
    - So the Jews in the Roman church had this deep-seated fear of sinning against God by eating those meats.
- Meanwhile, Rome was packed full of temples to various gods and emperors.
    - They had temples to Apollo, Caesar, Ceres, Diana, Hercules, Hadrian, Janus, Juno, Jupiter, Luna, Mars, Marcus Aurelius, Mercury, Minerva, Neptune, Romulus, Saturn, Trajan, Venus, Vespasian, Vesta, Vulcan, and tons of others! That's just a sample. Not to mention the Pantheon, or "the temple to all the gods," just to cover their bases, in case they missed any.
    - And basically every temple in Rome served meat as a part of their sacrificial worship.
    - Back in our 1 Corinthians series, Kyle called these temples "the Fareway meat markets of the ancient world." It's just where you went to get meat.
        - What kind of meat? You guessed it: all kinds. Including meat that was unclean to Jews.
    - And not only that, but these animals had been sacrificed to Roman gods, so for many of the people living in Rome, eating that meat was an act of worship to those gods.
        - Furthermore, later rabbinic tradition forbade Jews from eating or drinking anything that had been associated with idols or idolaters at any point.

    - And now there's this whole new thing called Christianity, where it seems like food and drink don't really matter anymore!
- Can you see why there might have been some tension in the Roman church around meat and wine?
    - You've essentially got three groups of people:
        - Jewish believers saying, "You can't eat that meat! It's unclean! It's sinful!"
        - Gentile believers saying, "You can't eat that meat! It's the same as worshiping demons! It's sinful!"
        - And then a third group of Jews and Gentiles saying, "Hey man, Christ has set me free, so I can eat whatever I want! You need to get over it! Christ set me free so you can't tell me what to do! In fact, it's sinful not to eat it!"
        - Who's right?
- Into this conflict, Paul injects today's passage.
    - And he essentially says: "You're missing the point."
    - Yes, you have been given liberty, but you've also been given a conscience.
- When we talk about liberty and conscience, we have to hold them both in tension. Like two threads, we can't pull too hard on either one or we risk falling into unloving, unfruitful error. Let's look at both.
    - The thread of Liberty: We are indeed free in Christ, but not free to be selfish.
        - We've been set free from the penalty of sin because Jesus took it away from us on the cross (Colossians 2).
        - In Christ, there are no more clean or unclean animals.
        - God makes that clear in Acts 10, when Peter sees a sheet descending from heaven full of every kind of animal, and he hears a voice saying, "Eat!"
        - And we know from 1 Corinthians 8, which has a ton of parallels with this passage, that food sacrificed to idols is nothing because the idols themselves are nothing (1 Corinthians 8:4).
        - That's all true. Gloriously true!
        - And yet, we are called to be sensitive to the needs of others. To lovingly serve them. To joyfully lay down our liberty for the good of our brothers and sisters.
    - The other thread is Conscience: Everyone has been given a conscience—a moral compass—even non-Christians. Everyone in the world has some sense of right and wrong, even if it's been twisted by sin.
        - Sometimes, the Holy Spirit uses our conscience to convict us of sin. He puts up a stop sign and says, "Don't go down that road."
        - Other times he uses it to compel us forward. He pokes us and says, "Go that way. Talk to that person. Give to that ministry."
        - But sometimes our conscience gets stuck in overdrive, hijacked by fear, finding sin and shame where there is none.
        - I call this an "overactive moral compass." It leads to a lot of anxiety.
        - It's spinning all over the place like, "Sin's there and there and there and everywhere!" So you feel bad doing anything, but you also feel bad doing nothing, so you're just… stuck. It's awful.
    - We need to hold both threads to escape both traps.
        - The liberty thread helps us avoid the trap of the overactive moral compass, the conscience thread helps us avoid the trap of being unloving, and helps us stay sensitive to the movement of the Holy Spirit.
        - Pulling too hard on the liberty thread makes you trample on the consciences of your brothers and sisters. Wounding, or hindering, their faith. Causing them to stumble.

        - Pulling too hard on the conscience thread makes you miss out on the freedom you've been given in Christ. Freedom from sin and shame and fear.
    - Both people need both threads. Paul's message isn't just for one group or the other.
    - Look back just a little earlier to Romans 14:1-3:
        - 1 As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. 2 One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.
    - Both are welcomed. Both can fall into error. We need to hold both liberty and conscience in tension.
    - Yes to liberty, and yes to conscience, but not one at the expense of the other.
- Let's look closer at how Paul navigates this tension in our passage.

2. Do not pass judgment

- First, he says, right away in v 13: Don't pass judgment on one another.
    - That's a pretty common phrase today, right? "Don't judge me." "You can't judge me or you're a hypocrite." "Only God can judge me."
    - Let's define judgment first.
    - James 4 tells us that "There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy." (James 4:12)
    - So God alone is the judge. He is perfectly righteous and just. He has no sin. And what does he judge? Whether or not someone is saved.
- When v 13 talks about not passing judgment on one another, it's not saying, "Anything goes! There's no more right or wrong!"
    - It's saying, "Don't put yourself on the judgment seat reserved for God alone. Don't look down on your brothers and sisters just because they have a more or less sensitive conscience than you. Don't assume they aren't really Christians just because their life looks different than yours, or because they have different convictions than you."
- A few clarifications: We're not talking about denying the primary doctrines of the Christian faith.
    - Rom 14:1 makes it clear that we're talking about opinions here, not doctrines.
    - There are primary beliefs in the Christian faith, and there are secondary beliefs. Gavin Ortlund has a great book about this called "*Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage*."
- Primary beliefs are things you have to believe to be a Christian.
    - This would include belief in the Trinity, belief in the existence of sin, belief in the humanity and deity of Jesus, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, in the sinlessness of Jesus, in the exclusivity of salvation by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, belief in the finished work of Christ on the cross.
    - Those are primary views. Salvific views. If you believe those things, and if you believe in your heart and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord (Rom 10:9), then you're a Christian. No question.
    - If you don't believe those things, it's not too late. You can still turn to Christ today. Ask him to save you from your sin. He will!
- Secondary beliefs are things that Spirit-filled Christians can disagree on. They're things like the age of the earth, the role of free will in our justification, the role of effort in our sanctification, whether baptism should be dunking or sprinkling, whether communion should have grape juice or wine, the timing of the millennium when Christ returns, the style of music, the color of the carpet.
    - Those are all secondary beliefs. Important! Worth investigating!

    - Hear me say this: It is good to have theological views and opinions, very good, but they're not salvific. They don't determine your salvation.
    - They might determine what church you go to, but they don't save you.
- Another clarification: Paul's not talking about correcting a sinful practice here. He himself calls people out for their sin in several places, and holding each other accountable is a big part of living in community.
    - He's specifically talking about arguing over secondary issues, matters of conscience and opinion, not matters of salvation.
- So if you're talking to someone who has placed their faith in Christ, trusted in him alone for salvation, and you see evidence of the Fruit of the Spirit in their life, then you cannot say, "Nah. You're not good enough. You haven't done what I've done. You don't live like I do. You don't share my convictions, so you're not really a Christian."
    - That's putting yourself in judgment over them. Placing yourself on God's throne. Pouring condemnation on them.
- In the context of the church in Rome, this was the people who brought temple-sacrificed pork to a church potluck. Saying to both Jews and Gentiles, "I don't care how it makes you feel. Unless you eat like me, you're not really a Christian."
    - This is what Paul calls, "putting a stumbling block or a hindrance in the way of a brother or sister" (v. 13), and he has some pretty harsh words for people who do this.
    - He says you're grieving them, destroying the one for whom Christ died (v 15), even destroying the work of God (v 20), because you're weakening that person's faith. You're not strengthening them. You're tearing them down. It's unloving.
- I think of the example of my mom. She grew up in a household with an alcoholic father. He was never abusive, but when he had a few drinks, he became distant, cold, unavailable. Even after just a sip of alcohol, he would disappear for weeks.
    - Later in life, he became a Christian and broke free from alcohol completely, and became an incredible dad and grandpa.
    - But for my mom, she hates alcohol, still to this day. It's the thing that took her dad away from her when she needed him.
    - So when I go home for Thanksgiving in a few weeks, should I pull out a 6-pack of beer and make her drink it with me?
    - Absolutely not! Not because there's anything inherently sinful about the beer (remember, Jesus drank wine), but because it would be incredibly unloving. It would be hurtful to her.
    - It would make her feel like she's linking arms with the enemy that stole her dad.
    - It would make her worry that I'm treating my kids the way her dad treated her.
    - It would be tearing her faith down. Destroying her peace.
    - I can love her well by just not bringing beer. By sacrificing a tiny slice of my liberty. I can do that for her.
    - It's worth it to not make her violate her conscience.
- We see how Paul navigates this tension in a couple places:
    - V. 14: Nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.
    - V. 20: Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.
- Do you feel the tension here?
    - He's actually agreeing with the "liberty" people in this specific instance.
    - He's saying, "You're right, no specific food or drink is unclean in God's eyes anymore, BUT, if anyone thinks the meat is unclean, if eating it would violate their conscience, then it's unloving for you to make them eat it, or even to eat it in front of them."

    - You're causing them to stumble, hindering their faith, and that's wrong. Don't do it.
- V. 16: You regard the meat as good, and that's fine, but your brother or sister sees it as evil. Don't trample on their sensitive consciences.
    - By the way, a sensitive conscience is better than a seared conscience (1 Tim 4:2). Being too sensitive is better than being too calloused (Eph 4:19).
        - The Bible talks about this in 1 Tim 4 and Eph 4.
    - The more you ignore the Holy Spirit's promptings, the more calloused you'll become, and eventually you won't be able to sense the Spirit's presence at all. That's what 1 Thess 5:19 means by "not quenching the Spirit."
- We have to hold both liberty and conscience in tension. We are free, but we can't use our freedom to quench the Spirit or trip up our brothers and sisters.
    - Don't make your brothers and sisters violate their consciences.
- Paul is not saying "anything goes!" He is telling us to bear patiently with one another, and not to pass judgment or condemnation on another person just because their conscience is different from yours.
- Quick heart check: Does this feel like walking through a minefield to anyone else? Like I'm responsible for the sin or sadness of everyone around me?
    - Do we have to memorize everyone's childhood trauma so we can avoid causing them to stumble on accident? Can I do or say anything to anybody?
    - What's the solution here Paul? If it's not good for us to be alone, how do we live in community without unintentionally tearing each other down?

3. Pursue peace and upbuilding

- The goal is summarized in v 19: "Pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."
    - Pursue peace, and upbuilding.
- Think of the difference between rules and expectations.
    - When I was a 7th grade teacher, I told my students that I didn't have a ton of rules, but I did have certain expectations. Maybe you've used this language in your home or workplace.
    - Rules give you the bare minimum. They're like a bar to clear. Rules are a checklist. As long as you do these things, and don't do those things, you'll be fine.
    - And rules are good. We need rules. But too often we find ourselves pursuing "the bar" set by the rules. We want to get as close to it as we can while still technically getting over it.
    - Expectations, on the other hand, are goals we can strive for. Pursuing an expectation is reaching for a prize, not trying to clear a bar.
- This passage gives us some pretty big expectations. Pursue peace? That's big!
    - V. 17: For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.
    - Paul is saying, "Look, you're missing the point: there's no easy checklist of clean or unclean foods anymore, but you've been called to pursue righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Together!"
    - V. 18 says that by pursuing these things, you're actually serving Christ.
        - "Whoever serves Christ in this way" is acceptable to God and approved by men.
    - In other words, seeking to love others, to serve them, to build them up, that's how we serve God. It's not about what you eat or what you don't eat, it's about loving God and loving others.
    - Using your freedom to serve and support, not to gloat.
    - That's the expectation. That's what reflects his kingdom. Not keeping all our do's and don't's straight.
- We pursue peace and upbuilding.

    - "Mutual" upbuilding. Go ahead and underline that word in your Bibles. That's an important word.
    - Because here's the thing: When differences in conscience arise, when we differ on secondary beliefs, and both believers are seeking to serve each other in pursuit of peace, relying on the Holy Spirit, everyone wins. Everyone wins!
    - Those pulling too hard on the liberty thread have the opportunity to lay down their freedom, which increases humility and patience, and maybe they grow a little more sensitive to the Spirit too. Maybe they're even convicted by the Holy Spirit that what they're doing actually is sinful.
    - Those pulling too hard on the conscience thread get to analyze their assumptions, and maybe embrace their freedom in Christ a little more. Maybe they get some help calming down their over-active moral compasses.
    - And the rest of the church gets the benefit of two increasingly mature, peaceful, joyous, Spirit-filled brothers and sisters.
    - Everyone wins! Literally no one loses when we seek to serve each other in pursuit of peace, while relying on the Holy Spirit to guide us.
- Now, we've been talking a lot about meat, because that's the specific context of this passage, but v. 21 says, "It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble."
    - Underline "or do anything."
    - That broadens it out a bit, yeah? To pretty much…everything. "Don't do anything that causes your brother or sister to stumble."
- Importantly, the next verse makes it clear that he's only talking about the public, visible expression of your faith.
    - "The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God."
    - Is he saying, "Don't share your faith"? Absolutely not. Do share your faith with others.
    - He's been talking about secondary beliefs on meat and wine, not primary doctrines of the faith, and that continues here.
    - He's saying, "Whatever your faith looks like, whatever controversial, secondary views you hold that could wound the faith of another, just keep it between you and God." You don't have to flaunt your freedom.
    - It's not worth it to win an argument if you drive the other person away from the community of faith in the process.
    - If expressing your views causes someone to stumble, v. 22 says you're just passing judgment on yourself. Blessed is the one who doesn't do this.
    - Many times, most times, it's better to just say, "I guess we disagree. But I'm glad we're here together."
- And if we keep it in the realm of meat sacrificed to Jupiter or whatever, we might agree in a purely academic way.
    - Sure, eat it, don't eat it, I can see how that doesn't really matter, all that matters is building each other up. Got it. Good. Easy.
    - But what if we bring it to our present day? What if we apply this to… politics? Is that too sensitive?
    - We've got an election coming up in a few days.
    - And it should come as no surprise that Spirit-filled Christians can disagree on politics. Sometimes very strongly. Sometimes holding exactly opposite views on how things should be done.
    - But that makes it a secondary belief, not primary. So it falls neatly into the category of what Paul is addressing in this passage.
    - Look at your political opinions through the lens of liberty and conscience. Think of it like the meat and wine in Rome.
- This passage isn't saying, "Don't vote," or "Don't have any political opinions." Or even, "Don't try to persuade people to vote like you." That's all fine!

    - You can definitely do those things. Policy matters because people matter. We all want good policies. We all want good government. And it's important to vote, because in our current system, that's how you make your voice heard.
    - We're all called to pursue peace and righteousness in everything we do, including how we vote.
    - And you have liberty in Christ. You're free to vote according to your conscience.
    - And you're free to *not* vote for someone if it would violate your conscience. That's all true.
    - But you're not free to pass judgment on someone because of how they voted.
        - To say, "You don't vote like me, so you might not *really* be a Christian."
- In our current political climate, it's so easy, dangerously easy, to assume that every Christian who votes differently than you is…fill in the blank.
    - To paint them with a broad brush and ignore the fact that these are precious eternal human souls, saved by the blood of Christ, set apart to enjoy him, side by side, with you, forever.
    - And I don't think our politics will matter when we fall face down before the throne of God.
    - Jesus is king. He'll still be king on Wednesday morning.
    - Let's not condemn those whom God has justified.
    - We need each other. We can't grow without each other.
- If we could only worship alongside people we completely agree with, we'd all be worshiping alone. And it's not good for us to be alone.
    - We need each other. We were made for community. We need our differences of opinion.
- Jesus gathered people around him with wildly different backgrounds and political opinions, and we're after formation in the way of Jesus, not formation by way of isolation. Not formation by way of political party. Not even formation by way of denominational affiliation.
- Formation, growing in faith, in the way of Christ.
- And that won't happen without one another.
- We need one another. Even when we disagree.
- Let's pursue peace with one another. Let's seek to build each other up.
- When we disagree, let's lay down our freedoms for the good of those around us.
- Let's live like Jesus is already on his throne. Because he is.
- That's what it looks like to follow Christ in the context of our relationships. That's what it looks like to experience life, together, in Christ.

Beyond the Sermon

If you have any questions about this sermon or about Christ Community Church in general, please text them to 515-442-4282. Our pastors answer your questions every week on the Christ Community Church Podcast. Subscribe on our website (ccames.org/podcast-churchco) or wherever you find podcasts.