

A Stumbling Block or a Stepping Stone?

Romans 14:13-19

INTRODUCTION

- A. In the end, after all the mind-bendingly tough answers like Leif Ericson, Johannes Kepler, George III and Ecuador, it was a plain old accounting firm that finally brought down Ken Jennings, the “Jeopardy!” champion, ending the longest winning streak in game show history.
1. Answer: Most of this firm’s 70,000 seasonal white-collar employees work only four months a year.
 2. On November 30, 2004, Mr. Jennings responded, “What is Fed Ex?,” while his opponent Nancy Zerg answered correctly, “What is H & R Block?”
 3. And so, after 75 shows, 2,700 correct responses and more than \$2.5 million in winnings, Mr. Jennings—a software engineer from Salt Lake City—finally put down his buzzer.
 4. Such an seemingly easy answer brought down the greatest game show champion.
- B. Is it not often the case that the “easy things” in life are what bring us down?
1. We have conquered our desire for profanity, but a traffic light brings that ugly monster back.
 2. We have conquered our greed, but when we see our neighbor’s new car we just have to have one.
- C. The Roman brethren were being brought down by something “easy”—the following of Jewish dietary laws.
1. When Paul wrote Romans, the congregation there was greatly mixed between Jew & Gentile.
 - a. “Visitors from Rome” were present at the establishment of the church on Pentecost (Acts 2:10).
 - b. It certainly seems that these new Christians returned to Rome & established a congregation there.
 - c. However, the Emperor “Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome” (Acts 18:2).
 - 1) The church was then left entirely in the hands of the Gentiles who had been converted by these Jews.
 - 2) These Gentiles apparently continued the work of the church & converted many of their friends & neighbors.
 - d. When Claudius died on October 13, AD 54, his edict was null & void.
 2. Jewish Christians were able to return to Rome, but they found a Gentile church with foreign practices.
 3. Cultural wars were bound to erupt, and erupt they did.
 - a. You get a glimpse of the cultural wars from Romans 14:
 - 1) “One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 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” (2-3).
 - 2) “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God” (5-6).
 - b. In the midst of that cultural war, Paul asks the Romans Christians if they will be stumbling blocks or stepping stones.
 - 1) It’s easy to be a stumbling block—all I need to do is look out for myself & my own interest.
 - 2) But being a stepping stone is more difficult.

D. We become stepping stones through being rich in edification.

1. “So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (v 19).
 - a. Personally, I like that the ESV places “upbuilding” here rather than “edification.”
 - 1) The Greek term refers to the act of building a structure.
 - a) Occasionally, the term refers to the finished product—to a building.
 - b) “Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the **buildings** of the temple (Mt 24:1).
 - 2) The idea of Christian edification is that—as a building rises from the ground—we help our brethren grow in Christ. We help them move toward maturity.
 - b. If we want to be rich in edification, we need to know how to build up our fellow Christians.
2. In Romans 14:13-19 Paul provides four stones that we can use to edify our brethren.
 - a. READ TEXT.
 - b. Those stones are: SKIPPING STONES, SELECTING STONES, & SPOTLIGHTING STONES.

SKIPPING STONES, v 13

- A. “Skipping Stones” are those we use to keep from judging our brethren: “Let us not pass judgment on one another any longer.”
- B. The Roman Christians were greatly judgmental.
1. It seems that the Jews were passing judgment on the Gentiles for not keeping Jewish law & the Gentiles were passing judgment on the Jews for not knowing the Old Covenant had been abolished.
 2. Throughout Romans 14, Paul tells the Romans not to judge one another.
 - a. “Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’ So then each of us will give an account of himself to God” (10-12).
 - b. Paul’s point is not the universality of the Judgment, a valid point we often make from that text.
 - 1) The point is that each person will give an account to God, so I don’t need to be judging my brethren.
 - 2) For the Romans this meant: “If you want to keep the Sabbath because that’s what you’ve always done, that’s fine. If you want to eat pork, that’s fine.”
- C. We cannot be a judgmental people.
1. “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Mt 7:1).
 2. “There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?” (Js 4:12).
- D. Judging our brethren leads to division, not to edification.
1. Judging others certainly led to division in Corinth.
 - a. If you weren’t of a certain socio-economic status, you had to go hungry at the Lord’s Supper; you weren’t good enough to eat with the others.
 - b. If you couldn’t speak in tongues, you weren’t as good as the other Christians there.
 2. It certainly appears that in Rome a judgmental attitude led to division.
 - a. “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions” (Rom 14:1).
 - b. Paul must instruct the brethren to accept the one who doesn’t have all the food regulations figured out. Why would he need to do so if these brethren weren’t divided because they were so judgmental?
- E. We must make abundantly clear that we aren’t speaking here of skipping over matters of doctrine & morality.
1. When we speak out against homosexuality, adultery, abortion, and other evils of our society, we are often told that we cannot judge.
 2. Paul is **not** speaking here of matters of right & wrong—he is speaking of matters of opinion.
- F. We each have our own quirks, and as long as they do not violate Scripture, who am I to judge you?
1. Perhaps you prefer the King James while I prefer the English Standard; we cannot judge one another.
 2. Perhaps you prefer to have a set devotional time each day while I don’t; we cannot judge one another.
- G. Let us commit to using the SKIPPING STONE to skip over the quirks of our brethren!

SPURNING STONES, vv 13-16

- A. “Spurning stones” are stones we use to forego what will cause another to stumble: “Decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. 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. 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. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.”
1. The word translated “stumbling block” in Greek refers to a stone in a path against which one would hit his foot & consequently fall.
 2. Paul is encouraging the Roman brethren to make a conscious decision never to do anything that would cause a brother to stumble.
 - a. The Romans apparently had a major problem in causing others to sin.
 - b. Paul writes, “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. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble” (Rom 14:20-21).
 - 1) Apparently, some were thinking, “If you don’t know that I can eat this pork, tough. I’m gonna eat it anyway.”
 - 2) Others would see them eating the pork, be tempted to eat it themselves, defile their conscience, & thus stumble.
 3. Notice that Paul is firmly convinced that nothing is unclean.
 - a. He says, “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.”

A Stumbling Block or a Stepping Stone?

- 1) That threefold repetition of “know,” “persuaded,” & “in the Lord Jesus” makes Paul’s statement most emphatic.
- 2) There can be no doubt whatsoever that no foods are unclean.
 - a) “Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (1 Tm 4:4).
 - b) There is no such thing as an unclean food.
- b. However, the strong in Rome were using this knowledge in such a way that other brethren were destroyed.
 - 1) Paul writes:
 - a) “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” (v 15).
 - b) “Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats” (v 20).
 - 2) Therein lay the problem.
 - a) The Gentile Christians at Rome were not required to keep Jewish feasts & dietary laws.
 - b) However, if their eating foods the Jews considered unclean would lead those brethren into sin, the strong needed to “spurn” the “unclean foods.”
 - i. “It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble” (v 21).
 - ii. “If food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble” (1 Cor 8:13).
- B. If we wish to edify, we need “Spurning stones,” to make a conscious decision to give up whatever would cause a brother to stumble.
 1. We live in an age where any liberty is perceived as a “right.”
 - a. “I have the right to free healthcare”; “I have the right to marry whomever I choose”; etc.
 - b. Sadly, that attitude has permeated even the church of God.
 - 1) Some might say, “I have the right to live & believe however I choose.”
 - 2) Never mind that living that way may cause someone to stumble & be lost in hell. “It’s my right, and if I want to do it, I’ll do it!”
 2. Obviously, such an attitude leads to destruction rather than edification.
 - a. “Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God” (v 20). Destruction is quite the opposite of edification.
 - b. But how do we apply this principle in a day when we don’t argue over what food to eat?
 - 1) There are many Christian liberties that might cause someone else to sin.
 - a) I started to give some concrete examples of liberties that could cause others to sin, but the more I thought about it, I believe that misses the point.
 - b) Everyone is different & what might offend my conscience and cause me to sin might not offend your conscience and cause you to sin.
 - 2) The point is that if I know you have a certain weakness but I disregard it & do what I want to do and you sin, I have seriously sinned against you.
 3. We must always be aware that the Lord Jesus gave up so very much when he came to this earth: “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9).
 4. If the Lord Jesus was willing to give up much in order to save me from hell, cannot I give up my “rights” to keep my brethren from stumbling?
- C. Will we choose edification over our “rights”? Will we choose to use “Spurning stones” & spurn what might cause another to sin?

SPOTLIGHTING STONES, v 17

- A. Spotlighting stones are those stones we use to focus on what really matters: “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”
- B. Many of the brethren in Rome were focusing on things that didn’t matter at all.
 1. After the cross, it didn’t matter if one kept the Jewish dietary laws or not. But because some were caused to defile their conscience over what other brethren were doing, it became a very big deal.
 2. Paul says, “Folks, you didn’t become a member of the kingdom of God to fuss & fight over what people eat and drink.”
- C. Throughout Christian history, there have been many who have focused on the little things & have forgotten the big picture.

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1. Jesus says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” (Mt 23:23-24).
 - a. The scribes & Pharisees were right to tithe mint, dill, & cumin—Jesus says they were: “These you ought to have done.”
 - b. But, that was where their focus lay.
 - 1) As long as they were tithing mint, dill, & cumin, all was right with the world.
 - 2) They didn’t need to treat their neighbor right—just take care of these little, insignificant herbs.
 2. The brethren at Corinth were more than willing to argue over what spiritual gift was the best.
- D. When we major in minors, we destroy rather than build up.
1. That’s the case because love is the essence of our faith.
 - a. When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37-39).
 - b. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34-35).
 - c. “The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Rom 13:9).
 2. Some might say, “Justin, you can’t just preach love and ignore obedience to God.”
 - a. Sadly, some in Christendom have wrongly defined “love” and make such claims.
 - b. But, proper love to fulfills every command God has given.
 - 1) “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (Jn 14:15).
 - 2) Every single command of God can be summed up by saying that we are to love God & love our fellow man.
 - a) If I truly love God, I’ll do whatever he asks—no point of obedience will be too much.
 - b) If I truly love my brethren, I will seek not to destroy them, but to build them up.
 3. May we be those who use “Spotlighting Stones” to focus on what’s really important & not tear down our brethren.