

Paul's Letter to the Romans:



THE PINNACLE OF
CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

And Now a Word to the Strong...Pt. 1.

Romans 14:13-23

Let me take a moment to thank my dear brother, Todd Vick, for his excellent lesson last week. I listened to it twice with great delight and with great spiritual profit. I am grateful to you brother for your hard work. I am grateful for your careful exposition and application of the text. I am grateful for your pastoral manner. Well done.

Now, if you missed Todd's lesson last week there are a few CD's out in the foyer that contain both his lesson and Pastor Tom's sermon. They are well worth the money.

Now our text this morning is Romans 14:13-19. I am going to read all the way down to verse 23 but I don't expect we'll get past verse 19 in our exposition. Alright then, let's put in at verse 13.

^{NIV} **Romans 14:13**...Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. ¹⁴ As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. ¹⁵ If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil.

¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸ because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ **Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.** ²⁰ Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. ²¹ It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall. ²² So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. ²³ But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

I had spent the whole morning sitting on the floor in a Hari Krishna temple listening to a Hari Krishna philosopher go on and on about the wonders of Krishna and the Bhagvad Gita. Now, before you get worried, I have to tell you I wasn't there by choice but rather because my foreign mission's professor at Dallas Seminary, a wonderful man named Ron Blue, had decided our class needed to go out on a field trip to reacquaint ourselves with the lost.

He was right about that by the way.

Anyway, Professor Blue met our class out on the parking lot at DTS one morning and we drove in formation over to a Hari Krishna temple just east of downtown Dallas to try to renew our sense of purpose in calling the lost to repentance.

Now I am guessing that Prof. Blue intended to accomplish that by just having us sit there and listen to this Krishna philosopher teach his people. I am not really sure if Prof. Blue knew exactly what would happen but I have to tell you after an hour or so I was beginning to lose confidence and I was beginning to get pretty irritated and not just at the guy up front with the microphone. I was thinking

something like this, **“You know I am paying three hundred dollars a semester hour to sit here cross-legged on the hardwood floor of a Krishna temple to listen to a pagan that I wouldn’t otherwise give the time of day.”**

But I stayed and listened to this Krishna philosopher drone on and on. I sat and I listened and I sat and I listened and I sat and I listened. And after awhile, and I know this never ever happens to any of you, I began to drift off and when I did I began to turn my attention to the little Krishna kids laying there around me on the hardwood floor, coloring in what I soon realized were Hari Krishna coloring books. Up until that time I had no idea there was any such thing.

They were lying around me there on the hardwood floor, ignoring their teacher, ignoring me and the other seminarians, all dressed up in their Krishna clothes, with their Krishna haircuts, coloring pictures of Krishna and some of the celebrities off the Krishna faith and it absolutely broke my heart. I began to think to myself, **“Now these kids ought not be coloring pictures of Krishna and stuff like that...they ought to be coloring pictures of Paul and the apostles or of Moses and the 10 plagues or of David and Goliath. They ought be in a class someone learning their catechism questions and answers or saying memory verses or learning to sing songs like *Jesus Loves Me.*”**

And you know it struck me as so sad that I began to cry...quietly at first and then out loud. After a while, some of the other guys began to cry out loud too. So we sat there a bunch of seminarian eggheads, crying out loud in a Hari Krishna Temple for these poor, precious lost souls...watching their mothers and fathers do every thing in their power to bring them up in the doctrine of demons when

all of a sudden this Krishna philosopher and his fellow worshippers decided it was time to unveil their Krishna deities.

Well I have to tell you, being from East Texas, I was not quite sure what to expect. I wasn't quite sure what it meant to unveil a deity, so I wasn't quite sure whether it was something I wanted to watch or not and then they pulled back a velvet curtain there on a stage behind their teacher to show us a couple manikins with blue skin dressed in wildly exotic Indian and eastern attire. Now I have to tell you, I quit crying almost immediately and sat there cross-legged with an enormously stupid expression on my face, you know like when a calf runs across a new gate, not knowing whether to laugh out loud or to start swinging when our Krishna hosts began to whirl and dance and beat their tambourines and ring their chimes and work themselves up to state of ecstatic frenzy.

While they were doing that, I kept thinking of Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

Anyway, they closed the curtain after a few minutes and stowed away their deities and began to calm down and we realized they were wrapping things up and we began to stand up and put on our shoes and exit the temple. At the door, there was a young Krishna man who thanked each of us for coming, blessed each of us and handed us a little paper cup (kind of like you sometimes find on cupcakes) with a piece of candy in it, a piece of handmade, homemade Krishna candy...as sort of a token of their affection or good will.

I took my little paper cup and walked out the door. Now, I had been pretty much at the end of the line so most of the other guys had gone out before me. As I

stepped out the door and down the step I noticed there on the ground, not five or six feet out the door, an enormous pile of paper cups and in each paper cup was an untouched, handmade, homemade piece of Krishna candy.

I knew, of course, immediately what had happened. Almost to a man, my seminary brothers had determined they were not going to eat any of the candy made by these pagan idolaters. They were not going to take a chance on being contaminated by Krishna candy. They were not about to let one of those blue skinned manikins get any sort of foothold down in their soul.

And I have to tell you, I was torn about what to do with my own little paper cup, with my own little piece of handmade, homemade Krishna candy. I was not quite as set in my ways then as I am now.

The men were looking back to see what the guys coming out were going to do, so I just stopped and stepped aside and turned and looked back too when Prof. Blue came out with a giant glob of Krishna candy in his mouth. He looked sort of like a hamster with a cheek bulging with candy. He even walked over to where the guys had thrown down there candy, I had a feeling he had done this before, and sort of looked through what they had thrown down to see if anything was salvageable. I think he actually bent down and picked up a piece or two and then on his way back to the car asked first one guy and then the next, **“Hey, are gonna eat that...and if you are not...how about...uh...handing it over?”**

I stood there for a moment and finally made my own personal decision about what to do with my piece of candy and...and...and I wanted to tell you that story because it is a great illustration about the difference between what Paul

means when he talks about the **“weak”** and the **“strong”**...and because it will further help me to illustrate an important point because unless I miss my guess the only thing you are wondering right now is whether or not I ate that piece of handmade, homemade, Krishna candy. Inquiring minds want to know.

You see there is something in the heart of man that cannot help but form an opinion about such things...something that causes a man to more or less make up his mind apart from a rational use of his mind. There is something in man that causes a man to react to such things based on a feeling in his gut...to make up his mind from somewhere deep down in his soul. In such cases, a man goes more or less by what he feels and not just by what he knows. Do you know what I mean by that? And you know what, the Apostle Paul writing through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit knew that. He knew perfectly well that there are some things...some believers cannot bring themselves to do.

And here's the funny thing; he didn't disparage that. He didn't put it down at all.

He didn't say, **“Oh for heaven's sake, why don't you guys grow up!”** That's what I expected but that is not what he said. No, what he said was this, **“O.K., if that is the way you feel, that's alright. Just don't be so all-fired judgmental. Whenever you are feeling particularly pompous, just remember that person...that person whose liberty regarding the thing you despise...that person has a master and it's not you.”** That's his point. And it's such a simple point that it is easy to read through this and not be quite satisfied with his admonition.

Now that is essentially what Todd covered for us last week. In verses 1-12 of chapter fourteen, Paul makes the point that we simply must stop judging our brothers and sisters when it comes to issues of conscience. Now that doesn't mean that we are to turn a blind-eye to gross immorality. Adultery, murder, theft, a scornful and wicked tongue...those are not issues of conscience. They're not. Those things are issues of sin but whether a person drinks a glass of wine or eats pork or even eats handmade, homemade piece of Hari Krishna candy is, in fact, an issue of conscience and must be allowed or tolerated or I think maybe even better, embraced.

Now Todd made the point last week and it was a very good point that the **"weaker brothers"** referred to here in Romans 14 were in all probability Jewish Christians who found it hard to lay down their feelings and attitudes toward certain foods or certain days on the calendar.

Now I think that is interesting, particularly interesting, because our tendency today is to think of the Jewish Christians as the **"stronger brothers"** and Gentile believers as the **"weaker brothers."** But in Paul's thinking these extraneous issues of food and days and wine etc. were representative of a **"weaker frame"** rather than a **"stronger one."**

Now I think that is interesting for a couple of reasons. I came out of a tradition that determined that the more convictions and restrictions a person could impose on himself and on other people, the more spiritual he was. But Paul doesn't seem to think that way at all. In fact, it seems to me that Paul felt an enormous sense of freedom with regard to these matters of preference. Certainly, Paul

identifies himself with the **“stronger brothers”**. You can see that if you look down to chapter 15:1.

^{NIV} **Romans 15:1**...We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

Notice how he puts it...**“We who are strong”**? You see Paul thought of himself with the group he called the **“strong”**. That means that Paul didn’t have any scruples about food or drink whatsoever. Now you can see, I hope, how remarkable that would have been...how remarkable that a Pharisaical Jewish Rabbi could come to the position that eating a **“ham sandwich”** with a Gentile might be a good thing. But Paul was not content to just leave it there. He was not content to just say, **“Well some of us are strong and some of us are weak and that’s all there is to it.”**

No, Paul determined that since there are those who are **“weak”** and since there are those who are **“strong”** that God, in fact, ordained such things to be and that each group had an obligation to get on with each other group to the mutual edification of both groups.

Now last week, Todd led us in an examination of Paul’s admonitions directed toward both groups and his point was pretty simple. It was something like this, **“Yes, you view distinctions in places where your brothers do not. Still you may not judge your brother. You may not look down on your brother. You may not despise your brother. And here’s why, God redeemed your brother, whether weak or strong, and if He did that despising your brother or judging your brother means that you are going against God.”**

Now you can see that especially in verse 4.

^{NIV} **Romans 14:4**...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.

Do you see his point? He's saying, "Don't be tearing this brother down because the Lord is going to make him stand and in your effort to tear him down you actually wind up fighting against God. That's his point.

You can see that the implication seems to be that while you might be willing to knock down this person, because they have a different view than you, God is not, in fact, willing to do so and actually intends to make that person stand and stand to very end.

Now in our text this morning, Paul is going to address special attention to the strong.¹ He is going to stop addressing the weaker bothers almost altogether and he is going to turn to the strong and say, **"O.K., you guys don't have any scruples regarding about food or drink or any of this stuff so let me tell you how you have to act toward those that do."** That is, he is going to address special attention to those whose consciences are not burdened down by self-imposed regulations regarding what they eat or what they drink or what holy day they celebrate.

And here's what he is going to say. He is going to say, **"If you are strong and not burdened down by all kinds of scruples with regard to these things, then you need to strive to deal gently with those that are...that are sensitive to ward those kinds of things...and you need to seek to edify and build up their faith**

rather than stomping their sensitive faith flat under the guise of liberty. Just because you don't have any scruples regarding these things doesn't mean that you can just roll over a sensitive brother that does."

Now there is something about that that troubles me. It troubles me because as an American I want to do what I want to do. Let me say it this way, **"As a Texas I want to do what I want to do."** I want to do that without any regard for how it will impact other people. I want my own personal right of choice and preference and I don't want to have to worry about whether someone's tender conscience is going to get caught up in my wake. The problem is, of course, that is not the Christian way. It's certainly a Texan way of thinking. It may even be an American way of thinking but it is not a Christian way of thinking. The Christian way is to regard others more highly than ourselves. The Christian way is to be concerned about the good of others more than fulfilling our own personal desires. That is the way of liberation.

I love what F.F. Bruce writes:

Paul enjoyed his Christian liberty to the full. Never was there a Christian more thoroughly emancipated from un-Christian inhibitions and taboos. So completely emancipated was he from spiritual bondage that he was not even in spiritual bondage to his emancipation.²

Don't you love that? **"So emancipated that he is not even in bondage to his emancipation."** So free in Christ, that he doesn't spend every single moment wrapped up in trying to exercise his freedom. He is free, free to be free...free to give way to others...free even to submit to others.

I think that is the point Luther is trying to make in the opening paragraph of his great work, *On the Freedom of a Christian Man*. Luther writes this:

To make the way smoother for the unlearned—for only them do I serve—I shall set down the following two propositions concerning the freedom and the bondage of the spirit:

Here's his first proposition.

Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

Here's his second.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.³

Now you know what, **“Both things are true.”** And we need to learn to live life in light of that.

You see what we are going to see Paul say this morning is something like this, **“Yes, you are free. But your love for the brothers and the sisters is...ought to be...greater even than your love of freedom.”** And you can see I think how that points back to the admonition he made much earlier in chapter 12 when he said:

^{NIV} **Romans 12:9**...Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.
¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.

And it is a reflection of what he said in chapter 13 when he said.

^{NIV} **Romans 13:8**...Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.

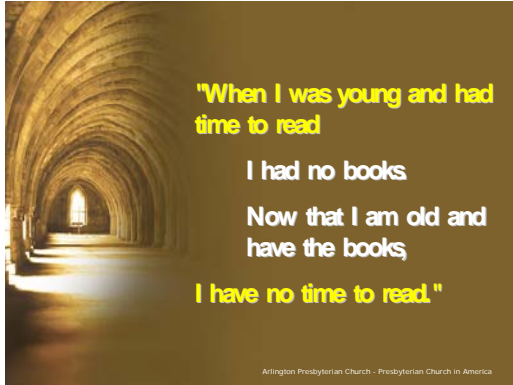
You see for Paul, love is the thing that genuinely, actually shows that a Christian understand their justification. If a person doesn't love other Christians he doesn't understand what justification has done for him.

Now before we dig directly into the text I just want to make one other point about this particular passage and that is that it is arranged in a chiastic structure that really helps you to see Paul's principal point. Now I have talked about chiasm and chiastic structure so many times before that I know most of you know exactly what I mean. But a few of you might not and just in case you don't let me just take two minutes and give you a quick overview of what I mean.

Chiasm or ring structure occurs in all kinds of literature. It was especially common in the ancient world where so much of what was communicated was spoken as opposed to being written down. Chiasm used repetition and arrangement to make something striking or memorable. Here's a common use of chiastic structure.

A...First line
 B
 B
A...Last line

Now what I mean by this being a common structure is that whatever is said at the beginning is repeated at the end and whatever is said in the middle is repeated before moving to the conclusion. Probably it would help to see it demonstrated so let me do that using a quote from Ben Franklin.



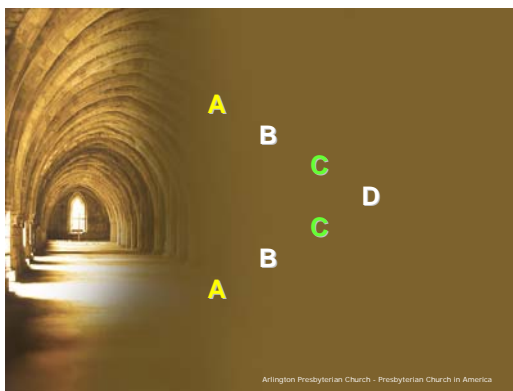
Do you see what I mean. The first line or idea is repeated or restated at the end of the thought. A...A. the middle thought is repeated twice. B...B.

So the whole structure goes A...B...B...A. Does that make sense? It's chiasm.

Even John Kennedy's great line from his inauguration was chiasm.

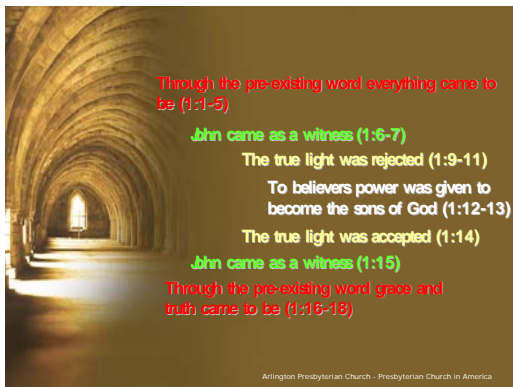
Ask not what you country
Can do for you...
Ask instead what you...
Can do for your country.

Do you see what I mean? Well sometimes chiasm structure adds even more lines and when it does it turns out to look like this.



Now when that happens the second A repeats the first one. The second B repeats the first one. The second C repeats the first one and the idea in the middle winds up being the principal point.

Now when we were studying John together we saw this kind of structure right at the beginning of the book.

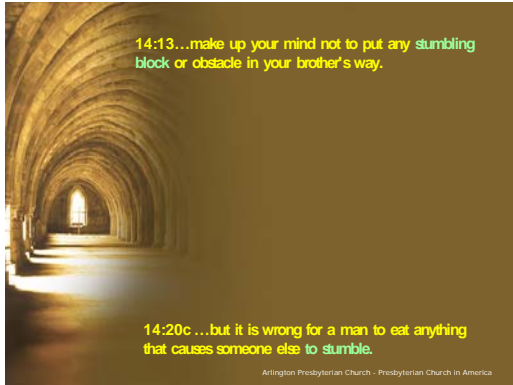


You can see how the first idea is repeated at the end. The second idea is repeated near the end and so on. But there is the idea in the center and it is the principal point.

Now I bring all that up not because I want to teach you about chiastic structure but simply because knowing about chiastic structure will sometimes keep you from losing the big idea of the passage.

That is especially true here in Romans 14:13-23.⁴ So let me show you how the passage lays out and then we'll go through the verses together and stop today at the center point. Does that make sense?

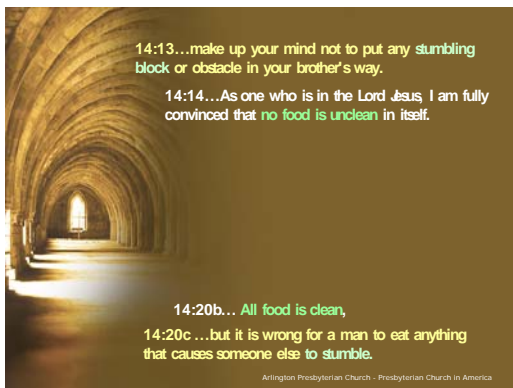
Now the first thing you ought to notice is that the idea of a “**stumbling block**” is repeated both in verse 13 and verse 20.



NIV Romans 14:13b...Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.

NIV Romans 14:20c... but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble.

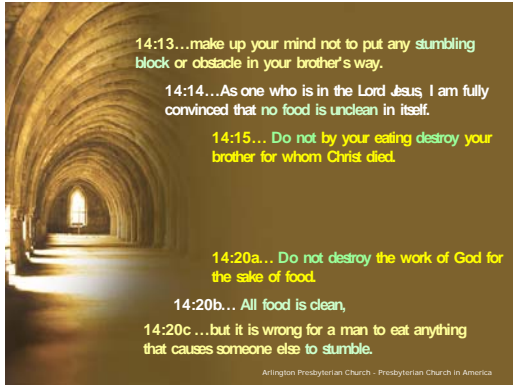
In verses 14 and 20, Paul talks about the idea that no food is unclean. Now he says it two different ways but the idea is the same.



NIV Romans 14:14...As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself.

NIV Romans 14:20b...All food is clean...

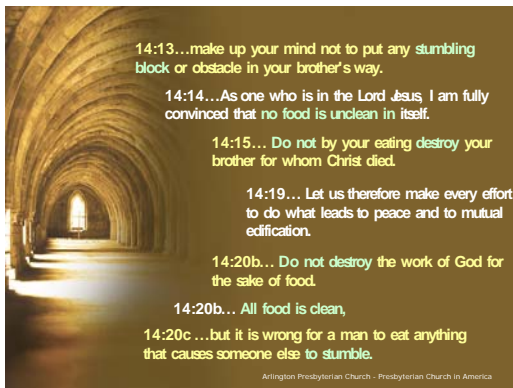
In verse 15 and 20, Paul makes the point that the strong need to be careful not to destroy that which God has made.



NIV Romans 14:15...Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.

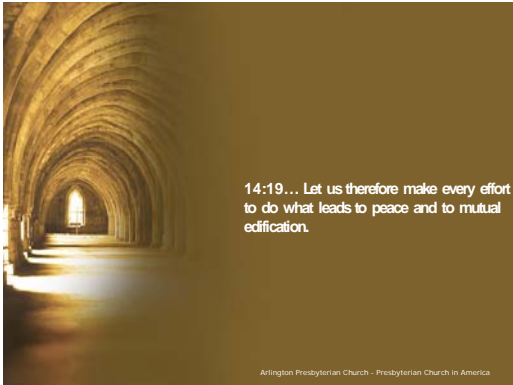
NIV Romans 14:20...Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food.

And then finally the central section...the section that contains the main idea Paul is trying to convey in the section is contained in verse 19.



NIV Romans 14:19...Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

Do you see what I mean when I say that the center of the chiasm contains the Paul's main point...that it contains the idea toward which Paul has been moving?



Now let's go back and start in at verse 13.

^{NIV} **Romans 14:13**...Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.

Now you ought to know that the two phrases translated **“stop judging”** and **“make up your mind”** are from the exact same word in Greek. But the verb clearly has two different nuances. It is not the first time Paul has done that same thing. You will remember, I hope, that he did the same thing back in chapter twelve when he said, **“Pursue hospitality”** and then turned right around and said, **“Bless those who are pursuing you”**. It was the same word used two different ways.

^{NIV} **Romans 14:14**...As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.

Now let me ask you a question. It is a really the simplest question. Her it is, **“Would Paul have eaten the homemade, handmade Krishna candy?”** What do you think he would have done?

You see the question is very hard to answer and the reason it is hard to answer is because

This is not a particularly good translation. It would have been better if the NIV had followed a more literal tact like the NAS. You see it is not really clear whether Paul was talking about something Jesus said or something he knows simply because he knows Jesus so well. The NIV implies that Paul knows what he knows simply because of his place in the kingdom and his place in Jesus Christ. But the Greek can have in mind something Jesus said and if it does it almost certainly has in mind Mark 7.

^{NAS} **Romans 14:14**...I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

^{NIV} **Mark 7:14**...Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, **"Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵ Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'**"

^{NIV} **Mark 7:17**...After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. ¹⁸ **"Are you so dull?"** he asked. **"Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? ¹⁹ For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body."** (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods **"clean."**)

Now the word **“unclean”** in verse 14 is the Greek word usually translated **“common”** and it was a technical term Jews used to apply to foods that weren't

Kosher. You know, of course, that Jews could not eat certain things and that the things they could eat had to be prepared so that all the blood in the animal was completely drained away. Now they weren't stupid. They knew that eating non-kosher foods wouldn't hurt them physically but they wanted to obey God's law and so they alienated themselves from Gentiles and pagans because they couldn't be sure that they had prepared their meat properly.

What Paul is saying is that all that is done away in Christ. His phrasing is very emphatic and dramatic. It is not just, **"I know intellectually."** No, the verb that is used is one that describes experiential knowledge and Paul uses the perfect tense in the second verb **"persuade"** to show that he has been fully persuaded in the past and that he has been persuaded to such a degree that there are results in the present and here's his point, **"Look, I know experientially and have been fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus with the result that I know nothing is unclean in itself."** In saying that Paul is identifying himself with the **"stronger brothers"** who don't have any scruples about the kind of food they eat. In saying that Paul is identifying himself with Peter in Acts 10 when he says:

^{NIV} Acts 10:28... "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean."

But Paul doesn't just stop there. No, he adds that next line that changes everything.

^{NAS} Romans 14:14... but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

You see Paul says that something can be objectively clean but subjectively unclean and that is because if a man thinks he is sinning in an area of conscience he is.

^{NIV} **Romans 14:15**...If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.

^{NIV} **Romans 14:16**... Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil.

That is...don't let the freedom you have in Christ be the source of someone speaking evil of your faith. You see Paul is concerned enough to say, **"If you are strong and not burdened down by all kinds of scruples with regard to these things, then you still need to strive to deal gently with those that are...seeking to edify and build up their faith rather than stomping their sensitive faith flat under the guise of liberty."**

^{NIV} **Romans 14:17**... For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸ because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

^{NIV} **Romans 14:19**... **Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.**

Now Paul is not asking us to give up the defense of the gospel/

Of one last word, **"coconut...coconut caramel"**.

¹ John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News For the World*, (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 364.

² F.F. Bruce, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Tyndale Press, 1963), 243.

³ Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian" taken from *Vol. 31: Luther's Works, Vol. 31*. Ed. by J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1957).

⁴ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* in the New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 850. See also