

Paul's Letter to the Romans:



THE PINNACLE OF
CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

And Now a Word to the Strong...Pt 2.

Romans 14:13-23

^{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.

Now last time, I spent a considerable amount of time developing an illustration about an experience I once had while attending a world mission's class in seminary. My professor, a godly and noble man named Ron Blue, decided take our class on a field trip to a Hari Krishna temple in Dallas. After we sat through their one of their services and began to leave their temple, the Krishnas offered us each a piece of homemade, handmade Hari Krishna candy. They did so as a

courtesy...as an act of their good will. They did it, I think, to soften our conflicted feelings about being there in the first place.

Now you will remember, I hope, that in my story many of my fellow-seminarians threw their candy to the ground as they left the temple as an act of conscience. They were unable to eat the candy given them by the Krishnas. They were unable to do so because eating the candy for them would have been eating something made by idolaters for the purpose of advancing the kingdom of a pagan idol.

But you will remember I hope, that some of the class members were not as reluctant. My professor, Prof. Blue, came out of the temple with a huge wad of Hari Krishna candy in his mouth. You will remember that he had no scruples about the candy at all. In fact, and I think this may have been because he had been a missionary to Guatemala for so many years, he gloried in the candy and was willing to eat all of it he could get his hands on.

Now I picked that illustration purposely. I picked it because it is fairly unlikely that any of you will ever visit a Hari Krishna temple. It is fairly unlikely that you will ever be offered a piece of handmade, homemade Krishna candy.

Now I knew that when I picked that illustration.

You see that illustration allowed many of you to think about the concept of the “**weaker brother**” and the “**stronger brother**” in an abstract sort of way. That is, the illustration allowed us to think in a theological manner about the very practical issue of trying to live out our spiritual lives in the midst of a Christian

community. Now obviously, the way we are to do that is by accommodating each other where we can.

And you know the illustration is a good one because all of you are able to see that candy, even Hari Krishna candy, is a fairly innocent and innocuous thing in and of itself, can become a source of contention among Christians unless they learn to accommodate each other.

Now I had a brother ask me after class last week if I thought Prof. Blue ate the candy on purpose, with an understanding that he was teaching the men in our class a lesson and my answer was, **“Oh yes, absolutely.”** Most teachers, most good teachers, teach all the time. Great teachers especially teach all the time. They cannot help themselves and when that kind of situation presents itself they must do what they were gifted to do. It is like passing an empty chalkboard or whiteboard.

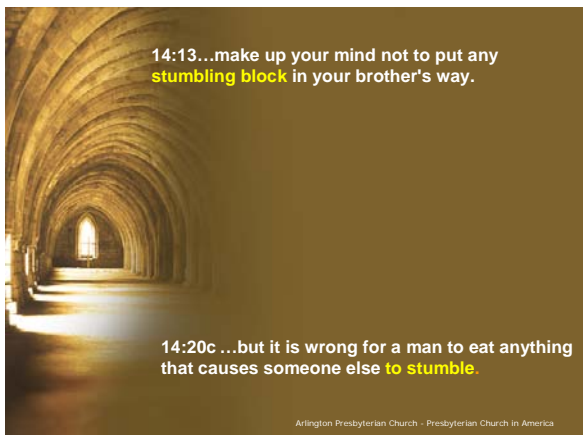
Anyway, I bring all that up because I wanted to remind you that last time we spent a great deal of time developing an illustration and the purpose was simply to get you to think about the issue of the **“weaker brother”** and **“stronger brother”** in abstract terms.

It's so funny. After church...after Sunday school...I had dozens of people come up to me who were beginning to think theologically about some of these issues with regard to other areas that were a little more pertinent to their own particular situation and they were asking, **“What about wine? What about movies? What about cable? Well, what about...?”** And naturally, I deflected those question saying that I hadn't even thought about those issues yet. I had of

course, thought about them a great deal. But I wanted to stay with Paul and here is his point. **The stronger brothers, those without scruples with regard to meat and drink, need to go out of their way to accommodate the weaker brothers, that is those who do have scruples regarding food and drink.** Paul wanted to drive that point home and he wanted to do so in a manner that was abstract enough to be applied to other areas of life...that is, he wanted the principle to include more than food.

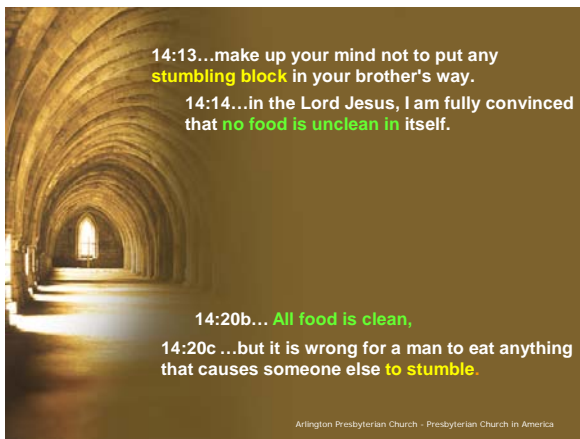
Now that is not just my opinion. It is born out in the very structure of the text. That is, it is made especially clear when you consider the chiasmic structure of the passage. Now because of that, I spent a bit of time, probably too much time, talking about the chiasmic structure of the passage.

What I said was this, **“The passage is arranged like a literary sandwich. Whatever is one top is repeated at the bottom. There is bread at the top...there is bread at the bottom.** Now I think that is born out if you just look at the text. Notice the phrase **“stumbling block”** in verse 13 and then notice how it is repeated at the end of the passage in verse 20c.

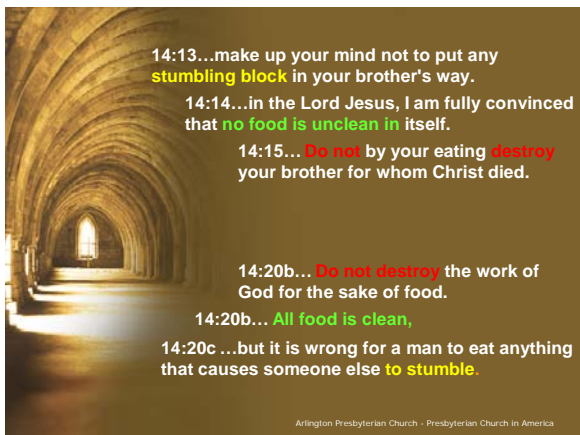


Now you can understand I think what I mean when I say that phrase “stumbling block is repeated like two pieces of bread on a sandwich. And that same idea is repeated as you move on the passage.

The next idea or layer down from the top whether you want to call it cheese or lettuce and tomato is also applied from the bottom side as well. You can see that in the repetition of the idea of “**clean**” and “**unclean.**”



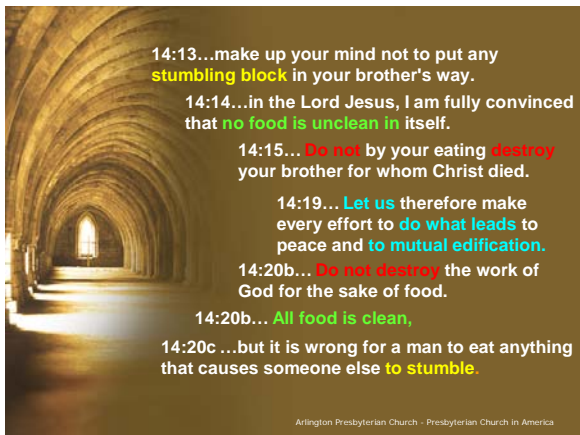
Do you see how those match up? A A' and B B'. And then, of course, there is a repetition in the next layer down.



“Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died” and that matches up with “do not destroy the work of God.” Obviously the word “destroy” is repeated.

So we have A A', B B', C C' .

Now here is the thing about chiastic structure and I want to make this point as clear as I can. **Whatever is in the center is the main thing.** It's just like the main component of the sandwich, the meat. Now how do we know it's the main thing? We know it is the main thing because whatever the meat is called is what the sandwich is called...if turkey, it's a turkey sandwich. If ham, it's a ham sandwich and so on.



Now it is the same way with a literary chiasm. Whatever is in the middle is the focus or central point of the writer. That is certainly how it is in Romans 14:13-23. It is arranged chiastically and Paul's central point in the passage is in the middle. That is...the thing he wants the Romans to believe and to live out in their community is contained in the middle of the chiasm.

Now that means that the focal point of Romans 14:13-23 is contained somewhere in verses 16-19. I understand verse 19 to be the center.

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



You see Paul's point is about more than food. It is about a view of community. That is, we are to accommodate each other when and where we can in terms of those things that cause other brothers to stumble.

We'll talk more about that later. For right now, I don't want to belabor the point but I do want you to see that in the end, Paul's point is about more than food.

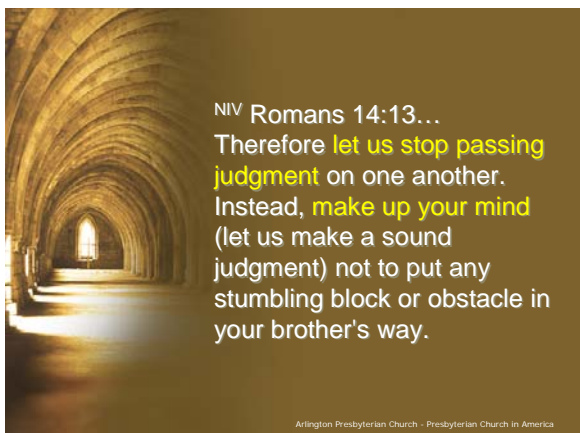
Now what is funny about that is that quite a few of you came up to me afterwards and wanted to talk about the issue in concrete terms. That is, you quickly dispensed with my story about candy, which by the way hurt me deeply, and wanted to talk about wine or drinking or movies or whatever. But I want to say that I am not nearly as interested in telling you what is right or wrong, what is allowed or forbidden as I am in getting you to understand the principle by which we ought to treat other believers.

So let me review one more time. We have talked about why Paul wrote the passage. He wrote it to get **“stronger brothers”** to live in an accommodating fashion with the scruples of **“weaker brothers”** which fits very well into the overall theme of presenting our bodies as living sacrifices and doing that by living lives that demonstrate sincere love and view others as more important than ourselves.

We then talked about the structure of the passage. That is we talked about how it is laid out. We talked about how the main idea is in the middle and how the main idea is that we ought to live in a way that edifies others.

Now what I want to do in the rest of our time is talk about the **“what”** of the passage. We have talked about the **“why”** and the **“how.”** Now, I want to talk about the **“what.”** That is, I want us to go through the passage verse by verse. We didn’t have time to do that last time but I think we can do it in the time we have remaining if we hurry.

^{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. Paul’s idea is that we ought to stop “passing judgment”** and instead ought to make a **“sound judgment”** not to mess up a weaker brother’s walk.

I think that means that Paul thought it was possible to sabotage, to mess up a person’s walk with our behavior...specifically with our liberty. Isn’t that a heavy responsibility to bear? Think about it. Our liberty has the power to mess up another believer’s walk. Now I thought about that, especially in terms of the roadside bombings that our brave soldiers have to face in Iraq. The terrorists there lay all kinds of traps and devices in the way of our troops and the purpose is to both maim and kill...to produce so much discouragement that we will eventually just give up and go away. Now Paul’s point is that we need to be very careful about the impact of our lives, about what we leave lying around. We need to make sure that the public exercise of our Christian liberty does not push our Christian brothers and sisters off the path, that it does them no damage.

Now that is simple enough to understand. We ought not to mess up a brother’s growth by an unbridled use of our Christian liberty. Yet, Paul hastens to say to the strong...that they are right...that they are the ones who are actually correct...when they think they have liberty in terms of food and drink. Look at verse 14.

^{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 I have to tell you here that this is not a particularly good translation.

For one thing, it doesn't really stress the emphasis Paul is trying to get across. When you want to make something emphatic in Greek, you push it forward in the sentence and that is what Paul does here.

^{BGT} **Romans 14:14**...οἶδα καὶ πέπεισμαι ἐν κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ ὅτι οὐδὲν κοινὸν δι' ἑαυτοῦ, εἰ μὴ τῷ λογιζομένῳ τι κοινὸν εἶναι, ἐκείνῳ κοινόν.



For I know and have been persuaded...

Paul says I know and this word right here is **“I have been persuaded”** It speaks of completed action in past time with a result in the present. Paul, here, is talking about experiential knowledge. Does that language sound familiar to you? He uses the same word, the same two words in another very famous passage. Turn in your Bibles to 2 Timothy 1:12

^{NAS} **2 Timothy 1:12**...For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; **for I know whom I have believed and I am persuaded** that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him until that day.

You see Paul is going to say that he knows experientially that no food is unclean. That is what he says, **"I know and have been persuaded that no food is unclean."** Now that statement carries with it the full weight of Paul's apostolic office. I mean it is one thing for you or me to say we know something but when an apostle says it's true, it is true. But to make his point even more emphatic he adds another word, the word **"persuaded"** or **"convinced"** and that particular word in the perfect tense in Greek means that it is an issue that has been settled or completed in the past and that it has results or consequences in the present.

In other words what Paul is saying is something like this, **"Look here I know experientially this is true. I have been completely persuaded in the past that my knowledge effects what I do and believe in the present."**

Then Paul goes on to say...

I know and have been persuaded in the Lord Jesus...

It would have been better if the NIV had followed a more literal tact like the NAS.

^{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.

You see it is not really clear whether Paul was talking about something Jesus said or something Paul knows simply because he knows Jesus so well and there is no question in my mind that he did know the Lord Jesus well enough to talk like that...that he did know the mind of Christ on a great many matters. The NIV makes the Greek say 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.

We looked at this last week but I want you to look at it again.

^{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.**")

You see Mark came to the editorial conclusion that Jesus pronounced all foods clean. That is, he came to the same conclusion Paul came to and that is that all food is clean.

I know and have been persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is common in and of itself...

Now the word translated "**common**" here is the word "κοινός". It is the same word used to describe the popular Greek of Jesus day, Koine Greek.. It means "**common**" or "**vulgar**" in the precise sense of the word "**vulgar**" or everyday or

common stuff. Now in the New Testament it is almost always used to denote food that is religiously unclean.

It is used in Acts when Peter has that great dream of a giant sheet coming down from heaven with all kinds of creatures and reptiles and birds and creepy crawlies on it and a voice says to Peter, "**Rise, kill and eat.**" Do you remember what Peter says to the Lord there? He says, "**No way!**"

^{NAS} **Acts 10:14**...But Peter said, "**By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything *common* or unclean.**"

You see Peter's point was I don't eat unclean stuff. I only eat those things that are ritually clean.

The writer to the Hebrews uses the word the same way when he warns those falling away from the faith and says, "**You think the law of Moses was tough and killed people simply on the basis of the witness of two or three people...man of man...you don't understand the severity of the punishment that is going to be poured out on those that call the blood of Christ unclean or common...who say it is no big deal.**"

^{NAS} **Hebrews 10:29**...How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

So here's Paul's point. When you get right down to it, no food or drink is unclean. Still he recognizes there are those out there with abiding scruples and

he recognizes that when a person considers something to be unclean or common subjectively it really is unclean or common for that person.

I know and have been persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is common in and of itself...but if someone should consider something to be common...to that one it is common.

Now what that tells me is that there is always going to be a subjective element to the Christian life. That is not the same thing as saying Paul was teaching situational ethics. He is not “**adultery**” is bad for you but good for me. He is not saying that you can “**lie**” as long as you don’t feel any guilt or shame. He is not even saying that you can ignore governmental regulations when you think a law is stupid. What he is saying is that there are some issues in which Christians have a measure of freedom to eat or drink or to do what we please. 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 sinning. Now because of that we must place certain limitations on ourselves. We must not act or drink or eat without consideration for our “**weaker brothers**”. Look at Paul’s admonition in verse 15.

^{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.

You see Paul’s conclusion is really very simple. If your behavior, your freedom, distresses a brother and you keep on doing it, what you are saying is something like this, “**What is on this plate is more important to me than you.**” Do you that? It is really a profound point.

Now that word for distress is a wonderful word. It is used at the end of John's gospel when Jesus asks Peter three times if he loved him. Do you remember it? Jesus probably did that to chasten Peter for his three denials but the third time Jesus asks him if he loves him, John says it "**distressed**" or "**grieved**" Peter. It hurt his feelings.

Now it is easy to imagine what Peter must have been thinking, "**You know he is asking me if I love him a third time...if I love him. And I know that he is asking me three times because I denied him three times. Oh, how it hurts that he has had to do that.**"

You see that is the emotion that is coming across in that word "**distressed**". You see what he is saying is if you pick up that ham sandwich and take a bite of it and you look across and see that kind of distress on you brother's face, you have gone too far. He is saying that our freedom ought not to lead to the distress of others. As a matter of fact, let's read John 21:17 together.

^{NIV} **John 21:17**...The third time he said to him, "**Simon son of John, do you love me?**" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "**Do you love me?**" He said, "**Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.**" Jesus said, "**Feed my sheep.**"

What Paul is saying in verse 15 is that the exercise of our freedom ought not produce that kind of grief in our brothers who do not know or share our freedom.

And then Paul adds this cryptic verse in verse 16.

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

Now what does that mean?

Certainly, it is not a principle that can be applied generically across the board. We cannot keep unbelievers from blaspheming the name of Christ. We cannot lash out and hammer them when they are abusive or coarse in their assessment of the Savior or of our faith. But that is not what Paul is talking about. No, I think when Paul is talking about good that can be spoken of as evil he must be talking about the freedom we have in Christ to eat what we like.

Here's why I say that.

In Greek the word "**good**" is an adjective. Oh, you know what...it's an adjective in English too. Anyway in Greek, even sometimes in English, an adjective needs to be the same gender and number as the item it modifies. Let me explain what I mean. Let's say I wanted to pray for Joan's son. Then I would pray for *him*. Do you see what I mean? I had to use the word *him* instead of *her* or *it* because *him* matches the word *son* in gender. If I wanted to talk about her car, I would talk about *it*. If I wanted to talk about her daughter I would talk about *her*.

Well in verse 16, the word *good* is neuter and because it is it points back to some noun or idea that is also neuter. Now the closest neuter noun is "**meat**". Now because of that here's what I think Paul means, "**Don't let the freedom you have with regard to meat, to food, to drink...to become the cause of evil talk...or troubled talk.**"

I think it is possible to sum it up this way, "**Don't let your freedom, which is very good by the way...become a stumbling block or an obstacle for brothers**

and sisters that you say you love and care for. That would be very bad and it wouldn't be very loving."

Now you remember from a previous lesson that **"Love...Christian love...must be sincere...must be without hypocrisy."**

^{NAS} **Romans 12:9**...Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.

Paul's point is that if we are so bent on eating or drinking, exercising our freedom and it destroys our Christian brothers or sisters, then it is not really much of a demonstration of love.

Now Paul drives that home in verse 17.

^{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,

Now Paul is not saying that Christianity is Gnostic. He is not talking about separating ourselves from the elements of this world. We are not to be ascetics who continually deprive themselves and everyone around them of even life's simplest pleasures. We are not to live as H.L Mencken accused the early Puritans of living, **"...as those people who lived in desperate fear that someone someplace was having a good time"**...a charge by the way, which was completely untrue. But Paul's point is simpler than that. His point is that our view of community is to be bigger than the plate or wine glass or beer tankard set in front of us.

We are not to live our lives as if food is the main thing. In fact, we are to keep at the forefront of our thoughts and actions that the main thing needs to stay the main thing and not get subverted by something less important. Paul goes on to say in verse 18 that when people live that way they demonstrate their understanding of what is important and will be revered by other believers.

^{NIV} **Romans 14:18...** because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

And then finally, he comes to his central point in verse 19 and summarizes everything to which he has been building.

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

You see we are to live in such a way that our brothers and sisters are edified and in such a way that the peace is preserved and we are to do because we have been gifted and placed within a community of faith...a community that is made up of all kinds of weird and wonderful people.

Now I love the way Paul says what he says in verse 19. He uses the word **“pursue”** or **“chase”** and the present tense verb there has a durative sense. His idea is to keep chasing after peace...be relentless...pursue it with all you being...chase after it and as you do chase after peace chase after the building up of other saints as well. Make that your purpose...not your love of food or drink.

Now after Paul touches on the central point of the passage he begins to work his way out of the chiasm and you can see I think that that makes the rest of the verses of the verses easy to cover because so much of what they say repeats

verses 13-15. So I don't want to go back through the rest of the verses. I think we can say honestly, because of the chiasmic structure, that we have covered the content of the rest of the verses.

Rather I was to finish by talking about this. How are we to respond to the **"weaker brother"** when the gospel is at stake. I think you know the answer from the Paul and his reaction to Peter in Galatians but in case you don't let me submit one example.

A few years back I was vice-president of a Christian bookstore chain. When I We had about seventy-five stores and were fairly successful. Now because of my position, I had breakfast one morning with some Christian book publishers in Nashville. Who they were doesn't really matter much. But we met these gentlemen at a very nice restaurant, a fairly exclusive kind of restaurant and we were sitting a round a large table...some five or six men from their company and three or four people from ours. We were just sitting around talking about various things before we ordered and one of their men said, **"We had supper the other night with a group of men from another book store chain and they all claimed to be Christians but it's clear to me now they were not."**

So I said, **"Really? You were able to determine that during the course of a supper? How did you do that?"**

He said, **"Well when we ordered supper, two or three men on their staff ordered a glass of wine, so it is clear that they were not believers."**

Now what he did when he did that was to mess with the gospel. What he wound up saying, **“Faith in the Lord Jesus plus not drinking wine equals salvation.”**

And I have to tell you. I thought that deserved a response.

So when the waiter came around, now remember this is breakfast, when the waiter came around he asked, **“Sir, coffee, juice, milk...?”**

I asked, **“Do you have anything alcoholic?”**

He said, **“Well there is this thing called a mimosa.”**

Have ya’ll heard of that? Oh...shame on you.

He said, **“You can have a mimosa...it’s orange juice and champagne mixed together”**

Well I have to tell you we do not get served that very often in East Texas. I like orange juice O.K. and I don’t care for champagne at all and the thought of mixing those two things together seemed really, really bad.

But I said, **“I’ll have two.”**

And I drank them right down to the bottom. I confess to you I drank them both and they were nasty. Now the men from that publishing company had no idea how to respond. But afterwards the brother that had started the conversation asked me, **“Why did you do that?”**

And I said, **“Because you messed with the gospel. You see the gospel is faith in the Lord Jesus alone and you tried to change that. Don’t add things to the gospel. If you had said to me, ‘I prefer brothers that you not drink’ I would have accommodated you gladly had apple juice but when you said what you said, you left me no choice. When you said you cannot do that and be saved I had an obligation to object and I did.”**

Nevertheless that was an unusual situation. Usually...normally...we are to accommodate our **“weaker brothers”** to the best of our ability because they are precious in the sight of God.

Let’s pray.