

Lake Cities Community Church
Series: Community
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October 12, 2008

The Limits of Liberty
(Romans 14:15-21)

After all we have talked about the last few weeks... it may surprise you to hear about what offended me a few years ago – and would still offend me today. There was one guy who really rubbed me the wrong way – because of something he was wearing. In fact, I will go so far to make the judgment that I believe he was in sin before the Lord. Are you curious what he was wearing? Well he was wearing these – Flip Flips!! Yes – flip-flops! There were his 10 little piggies - right out in the open for all to see. And I don't believe I am being legalistic here, and I believe that I was right not to extend to him acceptance on this issue.

Now before anyone gets too upset or walks out – give me a chance to explain myself. For the past two weeks I have belabored the point that legalism is an embarrassment to the church, and that we need to take seriously the Bible's call for us to accept one another in love, when it comes to differing opinions about the gray issues of culture or theology. But today I want to coming at our topic of unity from a different angle. *I want to talk this morning about the limits of liberty.* When do you take your liberty in Christ too far? What lines must we *not cross* with our liberty to ensure unity in the church?

Law Limits Liberty

During my final year at Dallas Seminary, I volunteered with the student newspaper - the *Jot and Tittle* and wrote several stories for the paper. One day the staff was sitting around brainstorming ideas for the next edition, and an issue of great controversy was raised – *the*

seminary's dress code policy. The student wearing the flip-flops said, "Let's do a pro and con article and I'll write the negative side because I disagree with the dress code policy." This started a lively discussion about legalism and seminary policies. Let me read you the policy:

The appearance of Seminary students is expected to reflect modesty and discretion. Unkempt appearance is not acceptable. The criteria for men and women while on campus for chapel, for daytime and evening classes, and the use of the library is professional casual attire. Professional casual attire would include shirts with collars, skirts, and pants that are pressed (dress trousers, Dockers-type slacks, etc.) Appropriate shoes and socks are also a part of this attire. Students are expected, for example, to refrain from wearing blue jeans, short pants, T-shirts, shirts emblazoned with printed messages, caps, athletic shoes, flip-flops, or sandals without socks... Infractions of standards in either conduct or appearance will be reported to the dean of students for investigation, and the student may be subject to discipline.

Now to fill you in – when you fill out your application to go to DTS, they summarize this very policy and ask: "Do you agree to abide by the Standards of Conduct above? YES or NO. You have to check a box! So, I asked my flip-flop wearing friend: "Given this clear policy, and the fact that agreed before God to abide by it - how can you now feel it is OK to wear flip-flops?" His answer was, "It is a silly policy – it is legalistic – other seminaries don't have this type of restriction!"

Now, let me set the record straight. I do not have any issue with people wearing flip-flops to LCCC. I am a big flip-flop fan. I have three pairs at home! They are the footwear of choice in our culture – at the beach, at church and at the symphony. But, my friend, if you sign a covenant before God promising to agree to not wear them in a particular, defined set of circumstances – then your liberty has been limited. **The law always limits our liberty.** Not the Mosaic Law, but the rules and laws we must keep as a member of society or that we voluntarily enter into at work, at school or in a local church congregation. "Every person is to be in subjection to the

governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God” Romans 13:1.

My flip-flop student friend confused legalism with limited liberty. Now can this student disagree with the policy? Sure. Can he can write an article against the policy and join the student council to seek to constructively change the rules? Of course. But what should he wear on his mission to change the rule? Shoes. The law limits liberty.

The speedometer on my car may go up to 140 miles an hour, and the speed a car travels is – on its own merits - not a moral issue. But in this country I do not have the freedom to express that potential – because of what? Speed limits. However, when we were on honeymoon in Germany – we went to pick up our rented Ford Fiesta only to find that all they had left was a Mercedes 190E? And do you know what is true in Germany? They do not have a law regulating speed on the autobahn – and I was able to express my freedom in Christ by driving 120 miles per hour – liberty was not limited by the law of the land.

Now there are a couple implications to think about regarding this. First is to be ready to submit to authority and to limit your liberty when you accept a new job, or join a church. Evaluate their rules and be sure they are acceptable to you. Second, there is a great responsibility upon a church, or a seminary, or other organization to be very careful as to what rules are set up. The more rules and the more laws set up, the less freedom people have in Christ. Churches must have order and make decisions, certainly, but they should be done sparingly, carefully and prayerfully to ensure as much freedom is retained as possible.

Love Limits Liberty

The law limits liberty and now we look at another constraint. Romans 14:15-21.

Rom. 14:15 For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.

Rom. 14:16 Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil;

Rom. 14:17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Rom. 14:18 For he who in this *way* serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

Rom. 14:19 So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

Rom. 14:20 Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense.

Rom. 14:21 It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or *to do anything* by which your brother stumbles.

Paul's teaching is profound. He is teaching us again that there are limits to our liberty - for the sake of the weaker Christian. Why? Verse 15 - so that the faith of another is not destroyed over a gray issue. How tragic that would be. Why? Verse 16 - so that a good thing (freedom in Christ) is not turned into a bad thing - destructive disunity. Why? Verse 17 because the church is not ultimately about gray issues, but about righteousness, peace and joy - fruit of the Spirit. Why? Verse 18 - because it is a win-win, limiting liberty is both acceptable to God and approved by men - it is what Christ would do. Why? Verse 19 - limiting our liberty is one way to pursue peace and building up one another, whereas, verse 20, clinging to or insisting that I exercise my liberty in some cases tears down the work of God. So - therefore - conclusion, verse 21 - I may need to limit my liberty and freedom to eat or drink what I want - if it causes a weaker brother or sister to stumble in Christ.

The summary of all this is in verse 15, “If because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love.” The law limits liberty **and now love limits liberty.**

Motivated by love for you, I restrain my liberty, voluntarily. For love of an unborn child, a pregnant mother limits what she takes into her body so that the child will not be hurt. *The stronger one has a love for the weaker one that causes them to limit their freedom.* The limitation is usually voluntarily and temporary period of time, until the weaker person grows and is stronger in Christ.

I was told about a pastor was called to a small church in a rural setting. He began to get to know the people and realized they believed a good Christian should never go the movies. They were legalistic in this area. Now the pastor himself enjoyed going to a good movie with his wife or children on a date night. However, he decided that if he immediately exercised his right to go to that movie theatre - he would cause division in his congregation. He would cause a weaker brother to stumble in their faith. And so for the first two years of his ministry he never set foot in the movie theatre. But then, over time, he was able to lead the church to greater liberty and he eventually was able to return to the theatre. In other words, *he stopped his freedom in the name of love:*

**Stop! in the name of love
Before you break my heart
Stop! in the name of love
Before you break my heart
Think it over
Think it over**

That is God’s “supreme” exhortation to us – *think it over* – think it over. Will my freedom damage the faith of a weaker Christian? If so, stop in the name of love. **Love limits liberty.**

Limit to Love's Limit of Liberty

Now – one more question before we close - *Is there a limit to love's limit of liberty?*

The answer is Yes. There is always someone to be offended by something you do. Do you know what I mean? And if you live in fear of always offending another person, you can ironically put back yourself back into slavery – and that is not what Paul had in mind. There is a fine line that we must find through wisdom. There is a time to exercise freedom -- when the responsibility is on the weaker brother or sister not to judge (Romans 14:1-5), but then there are those times when the responsibility is on your and I to limit our freedom for the sake of another. Chuck Swindoll had a helpful comment about this balance in his book, “The Grace Awakening” (131-132):

Some may be asking: Doesn't liberty have its limits? Shouldn't folks restrain their freedom and occasionally hold themselves in check? Yes without a question. Grace can be – and sometimes is abused. By that I mean exercising one's liberty without wisdom... having no concern over whether it offends or wounds a young and impressionable believer. But I must hasten to add that I believe such restraint is an individual matter. It is not to be legislated... The best restraint is self-restraint that comes from the inner prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion / Application

We have looked today at the limits of liberty. Liberty is a wonderful gift of God, bought at the cross of Christ – but sometimes God calls us to set aside our rights and freedom for the sake of another. First, the law limits liberty. For a child, this means the law the parents have established in the home. I could be a dress code policy or a position that a church takes. The law limits liberty. Second, love limits liberty. For the sake of my love for you – so as to not cause you to be tripped up spiritually, I set aside my rights.

As we close let me ask you – how has the Spirit been speaking to you during this message?

Is there perhaps an area where you have taken your liberty over the line? Maybe an area where you need to be more mindful of a law, rule or policy while driving? Or at your business - your school, in your home, or even at church? Or, maybe you are insisting on a liberty to the point that you have offended or tripped up a fellowship Christian spiritually. Christianity is not about eating and drinking, but righteousness, joy and peace. The lines we have talked about today are sometimes hard to find – so remember the supreme exhortation of the apostle Paul –**Stop in the name of love!**