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ROMANS 14:1

Romans Series: How God Changes People

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, we enjoy coming into your presence. We appreciate the worship, the songs, the opportunity for us to lift up our voices. It just does something healing within our hearts. So thank you for giving us the gift of worship. We thank you for the gift of fellowship that we can just enjoy hanging out and talking to each other and getting to know each other better and then sharing our stories and praying for each other. So we're grateful for that gift as well. We're also grateful for the gift of your word, so now as we open it up we ask that you would teach us. Speak to us in the deepest parts of our heart that we might change who we are to be more conformed to the way that you want us to be as we look at your word. So bless us now. In Jesus' name, amen.

Open your Bibles to Romans 14. Now in Romans 14 we come into contact with a very important theological truth from God's word. I want to spend some time elaborating on this over a period of weeks. So we're not going to complete it all this week, but we're going to introduce the idea. This is the idea of Christian freedom.

God has given us Christian freedom and it is one of the great gifts that we have as Christians. This is a place that we can get tripped up, but it's also a place where we can experience tremendous benefit. Freedom is that sense inside of our hearts that we are free, free in our conscience that God has done something. Salvation does that to us. It's gives us this freedom inside of our conscience. He takes away our sin and then we have to make choices about how we're going to live. So Christian liberty or Christian freedom that we're going to talk about today is what happens when your faith gets filtered down to the daily interactions of life, the choices that we make every step of the way.

That's what we want to look at here as we look at Romans 14. We're just going to look at verse 1 here, although I started my preparation this week thinking we're going to do the whole chapter of Romans 14. Then about halfway through the week I'm going, "No, this isn't going to work. I'm never going to get through the whole chapter or we'll be here for two hours. I better stop after verse 12." So I was going to get to verse 12. Then as of yesterday I thought, "You know what, I think we can only get up to verse 6." But this morning as I was doing this I'm thinking verse 1 will take us there. So I want to carry this over several weeks for you and help you understand more about Christian liberty.

The verse reads this way: *Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.* Now we're going to talk about that and understand what it means, but it fits into this bigger picture of Christian liberty or Christian freedom that God has given to all of us. So I want

to step back now and I want to put this verse into theological context about the Christian freedom that we have.

Let me look with you and show you what Galatians 5:1 says. *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*

The idea is that many of the Jewish Christians came out of this Jewish Mosaic law and that was defining their spirituality. But what Jesus is saying now is that the Holy Spirit comes into our life and He defines this spirituality differently. It has to do with grace and it has to do with freedom that we have. So don't get tied into this list of dos and don'ts or you're going to get stuck. So if you believe that your faith is tied into dos and don'ts in particular that defines your spirituality, you need to be listening today and know how that fits into the reality of our spirituality and what God has designed for us. Freedom in Christ is very important to understand and God wants us to experience that freedom on the inside.

Another verse that describes this is how we defend this freedom. *Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.* Don't let anybody judge you for your Christian freedom. There's this Christian freedom that's there. So don't miss this because it's such a beautiful thing that God has equipped us with in our Christian lives, freedom we have in Christ. 2 Corinthians describes it this way – *where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.* God wants you to enjoy it. He wants you to experience it. It's part of who we are.

Now I'm going to share with you in preparation to drill into Romans 14 six principles about freedom. You have to understand all of them together. You can't just take one. If you take one then you'll get sidetracked. You have to take them all at the same time. Let me look at the first one so we understand what Christian freedom really is.

The material I'm going to share with you now, the six principles of Christian freedom, are contained in a Bible study I've written. I've provided you with extra copies of them at the information table, so if you want to pick one up on your way out you're welcome to do that.

Christian freedom principle number one is this: I have the freedom and the right to do whatever is not explicitly forbidden in scripture. I have the responsibility to take a stand for the freedom I have in Christ. My choice is between God and me.

What we're describing here is when your faith starts filtering down into the very actions that you take every day where you live, then we make all kinds of different choices. You make a different choice than you make, and you make a different choice than I make. What it comes down to here is how we apply our faith because it happens in different ways. That application we have down here on all the little choices that we make is our freedom that we enjoy in Christ. You have the freedom to make that decision down at that bottom level on your own, between you and God. That's what Christian liberty is all about. We have tremendous freedom to make those decisions.

Now that's the opposite of legalism. Let me just describe what legalism is for a moment. Legalism is creating a list of do's and don'ts for one's self or imposing that list on others that

define spirituality in terms of behavior instead of the heart. We can never define spirituality in terms of behavior. It's always determined by the heart. So if you somehow believe that because you obey these ten things that God is pleased with you or you're doing these fourteen things that now you're somehow more pleasing to God, then something's wrong. That's legalism and that legalism creates problems inside of us.

Now I think lists are good. I think rules are helpful. I think we create for ourselves rules, obligations, and those are helpful. So we know for ourselves what is right and wrong for ourselves. I think that's good. The problem is number one when you define spirituality by those things and say, "I'm more spiritual than somebody else," because I do or don't do these things, or when I start imposing those things on someone else, "You must live the way I live in order to be godly." That's when we get into trouble.

If we look in our passage in Romans 14 we're going to see two examples that he's going to talk about specifically. Let me describe these examples and their cultural context.

In Romans 14:2 he says this: *One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.* It comes from the understanding or the story or the cultural problem that they have of the day.

They lived in a culture where there were people who worshiped idols. They would take and offer sacrifices to those idols. They would take meat and so they'd kill an animal, they'd offer a sacrifice to the idols, and then they wouldn't have any need for the meat anymore so they would sell it at a discount in the market.

Now you're a Christian. You don't believe in idols and you're going shopping for meat. Would you buy the meat offered to idols or not? Some people would say, "I wouldn't touch that meat. It's tainted because it's been offered to idols. The history of that meat is not good; therefore I don't want that meat. So I'm not going to have anything to do with it because of its history." There's another person who's going to come along and say, "You know what, idols or nothing, those people are just mistaken. God wants me to save money and manage my money well and that meat is half off. So I'm buying the half off meat and I'm going to take it home and I'm going to use it and I'm going to eat that meat."

Now what Paul is saying is you have the freedom in Christ to eat the meat offered to idols and meat not offered based on your convictions. It's up to you what you want to do. Furthermore, if you just want to eat vegetables, that's fine too. It's up to you. You make that choice. When your faith filters down to the very small things of life, you get to choose before God how you're going to live and what you're going to do.

The second example he's going to give us in this passage is in verse 5 where he says, *One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike.*

You have to imagine if you were a Jewish Christian, you grew up every week in a Jewish home where Saturday was set apart. You didn't take a walk on that day, you didn't work, you didn't go out and take care of anything. Saturday was set apart. It was a sacred day to the Lord. It was a

part of the covenant that God had established, the sign of the Mosaic covenant. It was so special to you that you would never violate that day. Now you're a Christian. Now you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Now you're under grace and you understand that the law has been fulfilled by Jesus Christ and that He is the rest provided for you that was provided in the Sabbath before. Now He's the rest for you. You find your rest in Jesus Christ and now every day is the same. So you might choose to worship on Saturday.

They all started worshiping on Sunday because Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the first day of the week. Well we're going to start worshiping Jesus and the church started meeting on the first day of the week instead of on the Sabbath. Now you've got conflict among the Christians. Some were saying if you're really going to be a good Christian you really should honor the Lord and worship Him on Saturday because that's our history, that's our spiritual heritage. There are others who are saying it doesn't make any difference what day, so we're going to worship on Sunday and we don't care about Saturday. So some people think every day is alike, so he's going to draw attention to these things because these were disputable matters.

So we go back to our verse here. Notice it says *disputable matters*. These are things that don't make any difference. I shouldn't say they don't make any difference because they make a big difference in our lives. But when we say disputable we mean they are not tied into a particular command that God has given. The Bible has principles that apply to every area of our life. Every area of our life. They apply to how you dress, how you eat, how you park your car, where you shop, how you get entertained. The Bible has principles that apply to all of those things.

We are always asking the question, what would Jesus do? What does the Bible say about this? What does God want me to do in this area? That's very important for us to do that because we're taking principles that God has laid out and we're applying them to our lives in ways that are very important for us.

Then there are some commands of God that are very distinct and directed to our actions. Unlike principles that apply in all kinds of situations, there's some things that God says specifically this is what you do and don't do. You do not steal. That's not optional. That's no a disputable matter. You do not steal. You don't sleep with your boyfriend before you get married. That's not a disputable matter. That's clear in the scriptures. That's what it's saying there. They are directly defined for us.

But there's a host of other things that aren't directly defined and I would suggest that most of the decisions you and I are making every day fit into this category. Let me give you some ideas. Here's some things I just wrote down that are disputable matters, things that people have strong opinions about (I even have strong opinions about some of these things), but they are disputable.

Using credit cards. Some would say, "We don't use credit cards. We think they're bad." That person has the freedom to do that."

Someone else would say drinking alcohol. Now we do know the scriptures say getting drunk is wrong. But the idea of drinking alcohol is a disputable matter. Whether someone has a drink occasionally is a disputable matter.

A woman wearing a two-piece bathing suit. Some women will say, “I can’t do that. It’s not something I can do.”

What about going to a baseball game on a Sunday morning and missing church? That’s a disputable matter.

What about eating junk food? That’s a disputable matter. Some people would say we don’t eat junk food. I’m going to say that. In fact I’m going to use that as an example in a moment.

What about homeschooling your kids? There are some homeschooling families that view themselves as more spiritual than other people because they homeschool. And there are some people who have their kids in the public school and they look down on the homeschooling families. Why are they taking their kids out of the ministry opportunities they could have in the public school? That is a disputable matter. The Bible doesn’t give us clear direction about that.

Attending a yoga class. Getting a tattoo. All of those things are disputable matters.

Now there are principles from God’s word that affect all of those things. But which principle are you going to take that’s going to apply? You probably have strong opinions about that list. I have strong opinions about some of those things. It’s important to realize this. Just because you have Christian liberty doesn’t mean that you exercise it. Okay? You have the Christian liberty to exercise and do all kinds of things, to do a number of things. But that doesn’t mean you exercise it.

I will try to persuade you in a particular area in your life because I think something is better than others, and you and I might disagree, and we might have discussions about that. I think persuading and trying to convince each other about these things are good. You might confront me if you think I’ve crossed the line and I’m not loving someone by exercising my freedom – that’s good. We confront each other in the midst of that. But there’s this sense of Christian freedom that overrides all of this.

So I was trying to think about in my life let’s take something that’s important to me. I think junk food is terrible. I think eating processed food will kill you. That’s my opinion and I will try to convince you of that. If you want some help getting out of your ways, I will help you do that. However after you leave here and you’re on your way home, you stop at McDonald’s and get a Big Mac and a Coke and fries, bless you. You have the freedom to do that because that’s what Christian freedom is. So we need to be able to take our stand, our position, and it might be the right thing for me to do in this given situation, but the way I handle myself is very important.

Now there are six principles of Christian freedom and I want to share these with you because we have to understand how we deal with differences that exist among us. We all have differences and that’s one of the privileges of the Christian life is the people from all kinds of backgrounds and differences come together to be one church and that’s okay. But freedom always has limitations. It’s been said that the freedom for you to swing your arms stops at my nose. And so there are limitations that we always put on freedom in all of our lives.

I'm going to give you some of these. These are not exactly from our passage. Some of them are. In fact two of them are ones we're going to talk about in Romans 14; the others are not. But I want to give you the full picture so you can understand this idea of Christian freedom.

You remember principle number one of Christian freedom opens the door wide. Principle number two puts boundaries around principle number one, as do all the rest of the six. I have a responsibility to limit my freedom in Christ for the sake of other believers who may be caused to stumble.

Now the key word is believers here. These are believers who might find themselves seeing you do things that fall into their ways of worldliness of some kind or another. And so we must, as we're going to read further on in Romans 14, and in 1 Corinthians 8, we're going to limit our freedom for believers who might not be able to handle what they see in us. We need to be careful of that. So in that case we might limit our freedom.

This applies to children too. Sometimes you might feel like you can do some action or you could do some things, but kids are around, so you're going to say I'm not going to do it. Not because I think it's wrong, but because they might get the wrong impression about the faith. They might get the wrong impression about their own freedom and what they can do, so I'm going to abstain or I'm not going to take advantage of that particular thing.

Here's another principle of Christian freedom number three and this one has to do with nonbelievers. This comes from 1 Corinthians 10. I have a responsibility to limit my freedom for the sake of nonbelievers because winning them to Christ is the most important thing. So if you happen to like doing a particular activity that's within your Christian freedom to do so, but you have unbelievers that you're relating to, you may choose not to do that activity because your primary goal is to win that person to the Lord and help them understand who Jesus Christ is. So that's another reason why you might limit your freedom.

Let's go to principle number four. I must limit my freedom when it indulges my sinful nature.

I got to tell you, I don't have a problem going into a bar. I'm not attracted to alcohol at all. I'm not interested in it. So I can go into a bar without any problem. I might not go into a bar just because unbelievers might see me going into a bar, so I might limit my freedom, the privilege to go into a bar. I might go into a bar and to meet with an unsaved person who wants to meet with me. They say, "Hey, let's meet at the bar." "Okay, let's meet there." And I might order a Coke or something like that and they might order a drink and that's fine with me. My goal is to win them to the Lord.

But there are some people who say, "I can't even go past a bar, definitely couldn't go in it because it indulges my sinful nature. I start getting attracted to something that was a part of my old life, so I don't even go there." For that person that is very important. So we always limit our freedom based on our own sinful nature. We have to look at ourselves. What can I handle. Some people think they can handle more than they can and they get themselves into trouble.

It's really not good for me to eat a doughnut. You know why it's not good for me to eat a doughnut? Because I have a hard time eating one. I like to have six. So it's best for me to not even eat one doughnut. So in my Christian freedom I can eat a doughnut. But for the sake of my sinful nature, which wants to exaggerate these things, it's best for me not to eat any.

So we want to be careful about this. This is principle number four. If you have a problem in a particular area or it might lead to a problem, then you probably want to make a decision that's going to not demonstrate your spiritual freedom or practice it in that particular area.

Principle number five. I need to be careful about imposing my personal convictions on someone else, thereby erring on judging others. That's what we're going to see in verse 1 today and the subsequent verses up to verse 6. We're going to talk about not judging other people because every one of us has the freedom to make decisions about these disputable matters on our own. Very important principle that we're not to be judging.

Let's go to the last principle, principle number six. I must submit myself to those whom God has placed as authorities in my life, recognizing that leaders (those are parents or pastors or government) have an obligation to encourage people to live godly lives, warn them about the dangers of life choices, and impose limitations when necessary.

So if you're fifteen years old and you believe that your conviction allows you to go to a party where they happen to have some drugs and alcohol and you know you can be strong in that, that's your freedom. Christian freedom allows you to do that, but your parents say, "Nope. No parties like that. You're not doing that." You have an obligation then to submit to parents.

So Christian freedom for you then is limited because submission to an authority is important. There are some jobs that we take on that require certain things about our lives and what we do. Because of that then we set limits on our Christian freedom because of that job. Those are the authorities in our lives.

Well that's a lot of principles about Christian freedom and that kind of took us off task, but I felt it would helpful for us to do that. Now let's go back to Romans 14:1 and apply this one verse, try to understand what it's saying to us so we can grasp it. I just want to take three ideas out of this one verse.

The first one, I've underlined some words here, the word *accept* and *without quarreling*. Because this describes how we are to respond to other people who are different. The whole passage is dealing with people who are different than we are. When someone is different than you, how do you think, how do you act, how do you respond in this particular situation? I would suggest that there's a takeaway from that particular part of the verse that goes this way. When arguing crosses the line of relationships, you're doing the wrong thing. If you're engaging in arguments about some disputable matter, then you are crossing the line of relationship. Relationship is more important.

As you see down in the passage, love is going to be the dominant principle here. So if we're not loving someone, but really holding onto our position so much that we are creating problem in the

relationship, we are wrong in what we're doing. This passage says we are to accept the person who comes to a different conclusion than we are. And we are to avoid quarreling or arguing past the line of relationship with that person. That's when we get into trouble.

A second thing we want to see in this passage is that we're talking about disputable matters. I want to bring that up again because we're not just saying if we disagree that's fine. We want to ask the question, does God say something specific about this? If the Bible speaks clearly to an issue, then it's outside the scope of this passage. There are some elements of faith and practice that will always be under discussion. We will never eliminate different points of view. But one person's conviction cannot dominate the whole church's conviction or everyone else's conviction. So imposing that on someone else gets us into trouble. We're dealing with disputable matters.

Here's the takeaway. Some things simply cannot be and do not need to be agreed upon. It's okay. We need to learn how to accept the differences and it's one of the beautiful differences about God's church. We don't all have to agree. We don't have to have a list over there on the wall that says you do this, you don't do this, you do this, and you don't do this. Now some churches have those kinds of things and if you don't abide by their list then you're under church discipline or bad things happen in those kinds of situations. I think that's a violation of what God is saying here.

The third thing I want to look at in this passage has to do with the person whose faith is weak. Now this is a little bit challenging to understand who is this weaker person that they're talking about. Well one of the characteristics of the weaker person is they're more strict about their behavior. They say, "I don't participate in this thing." Like me, I don't eat junk food. So in that sense I would be the weaker brother if it weren't for the other elements that are mentioned here.

Of course this weaker person, this person who has a stricter view doesn't usually perceive himself as weak. He perceives himself as stronger. "I'm better because I do these certain things." There are other things that make the weaker brother weak. The weaker brother goes on to make an extra step measuring people's spirituality by their dos and don'ts. That's where we get into trouble.

"I'm more spiritual because I don't eat junk food" would be a wrong response to me. Now you got to think here. I don't eat junk food in my own life and I do that because of a principle in God's word. In 1 Corinthians 6:19 it talks about honoring God with your body. I take that seriously. For me the application is don't eat junk food. So I don't eat junk food. That's very important to me and it's part of my faith. So it's not outside of my faith, it's a part of my faith before God. That's what God wants me to do. The problem is if I make that part of your faith and I tell you that's what you have to do, then we get into trouble here. The truth is anyone can eat whatever they want before God and that's the freedom we have in Christ, given the other limitations we've already talked about.

To the legalist (that's the person who sets these rules and regulations), grace is not enough before God. We've got to have this list of we've got to do this, we've got to do that, and we've got to do this other thing in order to please God. They have this ever-lengthening list of things that have to

be done in order to satisfy God or please God in some way or another. This person needs to wrestle with their own conscience, but they're wrestling with their own conscience to the place where they're imposing those convictions on others. So they legislate this zone of control in areas where they don't have their own spiritual platform so that other people then have to conform to what they're thinking.

The idea of *weak* here also has this shade of tender, whose faith is tender. In other words it may be a new believer. So the focus may just be on new believers here, not just old believers like me who've been around for a while who have differing opinions, but someone whose faith is weak because they're just starting to become a Christian. If they see you arguing about this, they may fall back into their old ways. So we have to keep that in mind here as we're trying to measure this as well.

It's a personal issue here. If the conscience is the seed of productive guilt in our lives then we need to use it to come to an understanding before God of how we should act. But if someone has not developed a strong moral compass, then they're easily persuaded to go one way or another, and then it leads them to confusion in their faith. So we need to be very careful about this as we're dealing with someone who's more weak in their faith.

Now let's talk about the strong person for a moment. We'll call them strong as opposed to weak, but maybe the person who's more mature in their faith. They may be acting immaturely in some ways by demanding certain things of other people that aren't appropriate. *To cause stumbling in a brother is a failure to love.* That's why we have to be careful of what actions we do and we have to consider others. The problem here in my experience is that there's some Christian somewhere who's offended with almost anything. So almost anything you do you're going to find someone who doesn't like what you're doing. So we have to decide in those cases, those people might judge us, and that's why we come to those verses that we already read about. Don't let people judge you about your freedom. You have the freedom in Christ to do certain things.

I know Christians who are against Halloween, people who are against Christmas, against instrumental music, against worship on Sunday, against evolution, some are against creationism. And especially as you get into the larger Christian community somebody's against something wherever you turn around. We need to be able to know how to deal with that. And people have good ideas. Some people say we don't believe in Santa Claus or people shouldn't do Santa Claus in their homes because it has some pagan background. They look at the history, like the history of eating meat. So they look at the history of this and they say you shouldn't do that.

Well it's challenging when you impose that on someone else. That might be perfectly fine for your family, but when you impose that onto someone else you get into trouble. We have to consider the freedom that we have in Christ to come to a conclusion in our own hearts about what's right for us and then we as a person need to limit that freedom.

Now it's very possible that someone may come to you and say, "I think you're not being loving or not being wise in the way you're exercising your Christian freedom," and I think we all need to be humble enough to receive correction and to reevaluate that. But the decision is ultimately up to you as the person who's evaluating their own decision-making.

This isn't a blank check. In some cases some people think, "If you're doing that, you're violating the scriptures because you're offending me." Well, I don't think this is a blank check. Some people think every time they stomp their feet in disagreement that they have the ability to cause conflict in the church or conflict somewhere else or in a home. That person has a spiritual problem, but it's not in this particular category. That's a different sermon. What we're talking about here is understanding we are to accept and to work with each other in important ways.

Here's the takeaway. The weaker brother is the one who chooses a stricter view as a matter of conscience and believes that their choice is the right choice before God, not only for them but for all. That's where we get into trouble. This person is weak because of a lack of understanding of Christian freedom. So understanding Christian freedom, I'm emphasizing this because this is part of the maturity that we want as Christians.

We're going to talk about it over the next couple of sermons because I think this will help us deal with the very specific things we get ourselves involved in. I think already you're probably saying, "Yes, but..." "Yes, but" this, and "yes, but" that. I think that's okay. Let's leave with a little tension here and emphasize the part of the Christian freedom that's important here because then I think we can come and deal with some of the applications to some more specific areas.

Ideally I would suggest we need to do these things. We need to decide how God wants me to live personally. Getting advice from others is great, but I need to make that decision for me. Secondly, I need to consider how my choices affect others and I need to adjust my decision accordingly. Otherwise I'm just being selfish and that is not right. Next I need to avoid spiritual pride because of my choices (we'll talk more about this next week or next time). We also need to accept others and don't argue. Very important concepts I think here for us to understand.

God has given us freedom. We want to enjoy it. We want to rejoice in it, but recognize that our freedom has limitations. So we wrestle in the midst of this and then we find where God wants us to be and then we're humble enough to be moved. If we're doing the wrong thing the Holy Spirit points out, "Hey, I think you're doing a little bit more freedom here than I think is best," and so we move a little bit in this direction. And so God moves us around within this window of spiritual freedom that we have considering all the things that are available in His word that describes us. So that's just the beginning. Lots more in this subject as we continue on.

I want to sing a song now. We're going to see the last song, which is *I am Free*. I just love this song. It's a song that describes the freedom we have in our hearts. Now I know some of you are not free to dance, especially not in church. That's okay. We don't dance in our church. I do wish we'd be a little more exuberant sometimes, but that's okay. That's Christian freedom. You have the freedom to not clap if you don't want to. And some of us will have the freedom to clap here at Calvary Chapel. I don't know if we have the freedom to dance. We'll see what that looks like. But any rate, I want to sing this song because it emphasizes something important. It emphasizes the freedom that we have and that joy that we experience inside when we are able to enjoy the Lord. So let's leave the lights on. Let's conclude our service today by standing and singing this song about Christian freedom.