



Sermon Growth Guide

Author: Rev. Dr. Jeff McCrory

KEEPING THE PEACE | Romans 14:19-23

September 20, 2026

Key Verse: Romans 14:19 - "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification."

Big Idea: Our conduct with others is based upon our faith relationship with God.

Foundations

This section of Romans is the conclusion of the issue of meat offered to idols and human freedom (chapter 14). Verse 14:19 introduces the conclusion with a double particle construction: "Therefore, then . . ." This signals that the argument is coming to the end. The main issue is how we are to exercise freedom in relationship to others in the body of Christ. Is our freedom self-derived, "my freedom," or does freedom have its roots in a faith relationship with God that extends to other people, thus, "our freedom"?

Understanding God's Word

The text is not really about food but exercising freedom in the body of Christ. For Paul, food offered to idols became an issue because believers were being asked to join pagan friends in idol temples to eat. For the stronger believer, knowing that "all things are clean" v. 20, this was not an issue by itself. It only becomes an issue when a weaker believer is harmed by the exercise of freedom. So, the issue is not food but how one exercises freedom within the body of Christ.

Applying God's Word

Where in our culture does the issue of exercising freedom in the body of Christ arise? Maybe some drink alcohol or read secular books or whatever the issue might be. The issue is not the behavior but how this might affect a brother or sister in the faith. When Paul concludes by saying, "Everything that does not come from faith is sin," he is setting the exercise of freedom in the relationship one has with God as it affects others.

Witnessing God's Word

We witness our faith in the way we ask how our freedom either builds up or tears down others in the body of Christ. If it builds up others, then this is good, if it tears down others, this is sin.

Is it Christian to pierce your ears? Can you wear Adidas to church? What about tattoos? What about dying your hair? Or braiding your hair? Can a Christian eat a hot dog, drink a beer, wear floral print, go to Costco on a Sunday? We love rules. Rules are addictive. The only thing we like more than rules is the feeling of watching someone else break a rule we would never, ever break. That is a delicious superiority. This section of Romans is what we might call the knitting section. The strands and threads have all been laid out. Romans has done all the theological work. "You people come from all kinds of backgrounds, cultures, languages, families, everything, and now you are the church, the Body of Christ. Now you are one. Now you are family. Now you belong to one another because now you all belong to Christ." But it is going to take some knitting. When it gets down to real choices, it is going to take some loops and pulls and sharp needles to get this thing together and keep the peace. Life Together – Keeping the Peace.

It is common for the church to suffer division. Get any group of people together and there is conflict. Sometimes we allow small things (food, for example) to become wedges and divisions among us. Paul encourages the church to find and then keep, guard, value the quality of unity in Christ. Preference peace. Value harmony. It's one of the distinctives of Christian fellowship. We don't default to conflict; we don't default to pushing people down and playing king of the hill. We default to kindness, love, harmony, peace. "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." (Romans 14:19)

Because we value peace, we are willing to do what is needed to keep peace. That doesn't mean the absence of conflict or giving in to groupthink just to keep from holding a counter opinion. Peace is not avoiding conflict but using difference positively as raw material for discipleship. Differences are how we grow. I

was in a conflict resolution seminar last year and the trainer said, "We all avoid conflict, but what if you saw conflict as a necessary ingredient to discipleship? What if we need differences to be able to grow?" Make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification, peace and growth. Sometimes it means laying down our own preferences. Sometimes it means setting aside our own rights and privileges. Sometimes it means having that crucial conversation with someone who makes you uncomfortable because they see things differently. We make every effort.

The topic at hand is whether or not to eat meat that was sacrificed to idols. This was how meat was processed. You hardly could find a butcher that just processed meat. Animals were sacrificed to gods, false gods. Just to get us there, let me describe this a little. We actually know a lot about how this was done in Rome. A wealthy family chooses a cow for sacrifice, the best one to best impress the god. Maybe it's a special occasion or a crisis or just a desire to get some benefit, a blessing for greater success, wealth and prosperity. The animal was washed and dressed up. Servants lead the animal down the street in a parade, pompa, with the family out front, servants and dancers following along, drumming up a fervor of expectation. Vestal Virgins mixed flour and spices and rubbed it on the head of the animal, an immolatio, dedicating the animal to the god—the false god; the god Christians are starting to think might be a demon. Priests emerged from the temple dressed in ornate headdresses and robes, with slaves and temple attendants (many of them sex-traffic victims). With showy fanfare, crying out to Juno or Mars or Neptune, the priests took their implements to the animal. They stunned it, killed it, bled it, and gutted it. The entrails and liver were laid on the altar and read like tea leaves, like a horoscope. Blood was splashed over the wealthy family

seeking the god's favor. Non-edible portions were burned in front of a literal idol, a statue of the god with prayers and petitions and songs. The best meat was roasted and served at a great feast. What wasn't eaten was sold at market.

Now, you're a Christian. You don't believe in Juno. You don't believe in Jupiter. This whole thing is not just unsavory, it's dangerous. It's damaging. It's a false hope and superstition. Slaves, virgins and temple attendants are all abused in the process. An ugly social order is reinforced. Now your neighbor invites you, your uncle. "Beth, you always used to come. I know you love these feasts. Please come on Saturday. We will have such a time, and we really hope for more blessing for all of us. Please come." Would you go? "Uncle, thank you. I just can't. I've become a Christian." "You've become a what?" "I don't believe in these Roman gods, uncle. They're not real. I think they're dangerous. Maybe even evil." You wouldn't. You can't. It's not innocuous stuff. It's evil. What wasn't eaten was sold. Some Christians buy it and eat it. Where else do you get short ribs, ground round, filet mignon? That's where it came from. "We know those foolish gods aren't real. Eat the meat. Meat's good for you." Do you see how deep this runs? What is the rule? We need a rule.

You know, there is evil we do. There is evil we ourselves make, even as Christians, primary evil. Stop it. Turn away from it. Make a rule so we can encourage one another not to do it anymore. There is also evil we are complicit in. We participate in evil, secondarily. We might not have a meat source problem (or maybe we do), but every choice we make is tied to a web of subsidiary effects. Sorry. It's almost impossible to move an inch without somehow participating in evil. I just needed to buy a pair of shoes. "Oh. Did you know? The rubber on those shoes comes from

India, the plastic from China, the thread from Indonesia, they are assembled in Malaysia, the carbon footprint is enormous. And if you spent one day in one of those factories and met one person, one child, who worked there. Oh my." We need a rule. We want a rule. The genius here is that it is not a rule; the genius of Christian wisdom about non-critical issues is that it is applied, situational, not the same every time. You don't get the rules. The decision isn't always made for you; you have to make the decision with the Lord's help, dependent on Christ. Some things are very clear, absolutely clear, but many things are navigation moments, choosing a course in a sea of uncertainty. What guides? The fixed stars of love for God and love for neighbor.

A rule about meat would fracture the community of faith and send souls careening. "Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble." (Romans 14:20) How could you destroy the work of God? We had this up above. "I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died." (Romans 14:14-15) The meat is just meat. But you might damage relationships by eating it. Don't do that. The relationship is more important than the cheeseburger. You could destroy the work of God, the work God has done to bring the church together, the work God has done to unite brother and sister in the faith, the work God has done to open someone's eyes to evil, to the evil of these sacrifices. Would you wreck all that?

"It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall." (Romans 14:21) They might fall because they see you, a fellow Christian, a Christian leader, eating what they have just learned is demon food. Maybe they used to get caught up in these ceremonies. Maybe they have family stuck in idol worship, spending all their money on empty hopes

of blessings from imaginary gods. “But the theology is clear! This is just meat.” Yes. “But I have every right!” Yes, you do. What would you be willing to give up? What would you be willing to lay aside? “So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.” (Romans 14:22-23) Some eat knowing it is fine. Some eat to prove it is their right. Some eat wondering if maybe it’s wrong. This is second level. See, imagine someone who thinks it is wrong to do, but has seen others do it, and now does it, all along thinking they are doing it against God, hiding from God, disobeying God. Even though the thing itself is fine to do, in their heart it is an act of disobedience! Don’t wreck the glorious work of God. The work of God, his saving work. Don’t wreck it just to bicker about small things.

During our year in Oxford, I had a prayer partner at Wycliffe Hall who became a dear friend. We shared our life stories and prayed for one another weekly. Another friend there was an American Navy Veteran; we had a different kind of friendship. One night at a pub, this friend broke out cigars. He had passed exams. I took one to celebrate with him. My prayer partner was shaken. I couldn’t ask him what was wrong. He started trembling and walked out holding back tears. I caught up with him the next day. “Tim,” he said, “those other guys were just being guys, but you know I’m a cancer survivor. How could you smoke in front of me?” I apologized. Have you ever apologized without quite knowing what you are apologizing for? That’s what I did. But it was this. This is what I was apologizing for. My freedom to

smoke a cigar—which I don’t even like—should have been set aside for my love for my friend. Sometimes we are so attached to our rights and privileges we miss the opportunity to love a brother by giving something up. We blow the smoke of our Christian liberty right into the face of our cancer-surviving friends.

So, application. Don’t smoke cigars with cancer survivors. Don’t slaughter bulls to Roman gods. Okay. Maybe you can find some more applications. The point is, instead of asking what am I allowed to do, what do I have the right to do, what is my privilege, my freedom? Instead of asking what you can do, ask this: what would you be willing to give up? What would you give to see your friend at home with the Lord? What would you set aside if it meant your son came to Jesus, your grandchildren could know Jesus?

“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” (Romans 14:19) Why? It goes all the way back up to the head of this entire section. Romans 12. This is how we become living sacrifice; we are the sacrifice. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.” (Romans 12:1) It edifies the community. It transforms us into the likeness of Christ. It is a glorious, living sacrifice. That we might lay our bodies down as a sacrifice, that we might offer proper worship. That we might be transformed rather than conformed, that we might know right and wrong, that we might grow and be edified in wisdom, that we might stand out from the world in a remarkable differentiation, that our conduct might reflect the character and heart of God. Do not use your freedom for your pleasure but use your freedom to build up your brother. This is our proper worship, our holy worship. In this way we glorify the one who gave up all his freedom so we could be free: Jesus. Did he not sacrifice? He is our peace.