

**ROMANS 14:13-23**  
**THE SPIRIT OF UNITY: GUARDING**

In Africa, they guard what they have.

When we were in Tanzania last year, we often noticed guards in places where you generally don't see them here.

Our hotel had a guard dog, who slept by day and barked by night.

The bank had a man sitting outside, with an AK-47 on his shoulder.

Next door to Tanzania's version of an "Internet Cafe", there was a building with no evident purpose, but a man with a big gun outside.

Even Bishop Kitula of the African Inland Church had a guard outside his home - a man with a bow and arrow.

They guard what they have. It is valuable to them. So they guard it carefully.

In the church, what do we have? We have Jesus. It's not just that I have Jesus, or that you have Jesus. We have Jesus. We are one with him, and we have eternal life with him, because of his mercy in giving his body and his blood for our sins.

And because we have Jesus, we have each other.

It is valuable. It is unspeakably valuable. So we must guard it.

During these three weeks, we are pondering Paul's words on having a spirit of unity in the church.

Last week, we learned that this spirit begins with accepting one another.

\* There are "disputable matters" in the church. These are not issues of personal preference or clear biblical mandate, but cases of conscience, where some believe they are permitted to take part in certain practices, while some believe they are not.

\* If we believe certain practices are permitted, we tend to look down on those who don't. If we believe certain practices are not permitted, we tend to condemn those who do.

\* So how do we deal with this? We are not talking about unbelievers, but fellow believers in Jesus Christ. God has accepted them in Jesus, so we must accept each other. We do this as we think with respect, speak with humility, and act with sincerity, lovingly serving those whose consciences and practices are different than ours.

That seems hard enough! How I need God's grace, just to accept!

But Paul is not finished. It is not enough for me to accept you. Like our friends in Tanzania, I must guard what is valuable to me. As my brothers or sisters in Jesus, I must guard you. You must guard me. We must guard one another.

As we have done often in this portion of Romans, let's sort through this issue of guarding by asking and answering the questions of "why" and "how."

Why? **WHY MUST WE GUARD** each other?

In general, Paul is writing here to the "strong" - to those who believe God permits them to do, what the "weak" believe should not be done.

Also, Paul's focus here is on eating. Recall from last week that some of these Christians were "conscience-bound" not to eat food that had been used in pagan religious ceremonies, or that were addressed in Jewish purity laws.

So what is happening here, as we deal with each other, which would lead Paul to call us to guard each other?

It starts with this: **HE DECIDES OR DOUBTS.**

"He" is the weaker brother - the one whose conscience is more sensitive than yours.

Verse 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."

What is Paul saying? As that brother looks at that piece of food, he believes it is unclean. He decides it is unclean. So for him, it is unclean.

Now let's go down to verse 23: "But the man who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin." He doubts it is clean, so if he goes ahead and eats, Paul says he has sinned, because he has acted against his conscience in doing what he believes is wrong.

Right at the beginning, we have to grasp this. The issue here is not whether the eating is right or wrong, in itself. Paul has already said he believes it is all right.

But how does that brother decide that issue, in his conscience? Or what doubts does he harbor? For him to decide it is wrong, or to doubt it is right, but then to participate, will be sin for him, because he is acting against what he believes is right, before God.

He believes it is wrong to attend that movie. But he does. It is sin, because his attendance is not from faith.

He believes it is wrong to take part in that sacrament. But he does. It is sin, because his participation is not from faith.

He believes it is wrong to go to a restaurant on Sunday. But he does. It is sin, because his going is not from faith.

He decides or doubts. **YOU DECIDE AND DO.**

Listen again to verse 14: “As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself.” Paul has decided all foods are okay, so he believes it is fine for him to eat.

Maybe you also eat. Or you do something else that the weaker brother would not do. You do what you believe is proper.

Now here is where this starts to get a little tricky. We have to fill in a few pieces to this puzzle that Paul does not quite fill in. Your brother decides or doubts, and you decide and do. Where is your brother as you do this?

I believe it is reasonable to assume that your brother is there with you. He will be present, as you eat.

So what happens? He decides and doubts, you decide and do, and **HE IS DISTRESSED OR DESTROYED.**

Verse 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.”

He is distressed. He is grieved. He weeps in his soul, as you do this.

He is even destroyed. The idea here is of loss of well-being. Because you have eaten, he is spiritually “injured.” The word here can even refer to complete spiritual ruin. He may be so distressed that the foundations of his faith will be rocked, and they may even crumble.

Once again, we have some questions, because we are missing some pieces we would like to have. What exactly has happened here?

\* Have you, as the strong person, simply done this in front of your brother?

\* Have you, as the strong person, done this with a desire to encourage your brother to join you?

\* Have you, as the strong person, even encouraged your brother so strongly, that he has joined you in this?

Once again, some of this is not clear. Paul does not describe precisely everything that has happened here. But this is clear: he decides that he should not participate. You decide it is okay to participate, and you do.

He is deeply distressed. His faith is shaken, even to destruction.

He might say, “How could you do that?” You might say, “What’s the big deal?” You are looking down on him, and he is condemning you. The spirit of unity is mangled, and even ruined.

Now if you know yourself, and you know other people, you know Paul could have said so much more here. As the “strong” or the “weak”, we all may be guilty of making a hard situation, even worse.

As he wrote on these words, John Calvin made a distinction between an “offense given” and “offense received.”

He writes of how the “strong” can give offense, because they do what they do, without any care or consideration for the people around them. It may be lawful to do what you are doing, but you are being rather obnoxious about it, and it’s no wonder your brother is bothered.

On the other hand, the “weak” can receive offense, even when it is not intended. Your brother may have a mean or critical spirit, and he may just “decide to be offended.” No matter what you do, no matter how you try to not be offensive, that brother will take offense.

It is complicated. But Paul’s words here are directed primarily at the strong. You have a brother who is struggling with this practice. You don’t. That’s why we need to guard. We need to guard against the distress, and even the destruction, that results from this situation.

But how? **HOW MUST WE GUARD?** What must the strong do, to do everything possible, to keep the spirit of unity?

When we are finished today, we will hopefully have discovered this: we guard when we guard our brothers, and when we guard the gospel.

**WE GUARD OUR BROTHERS.**

Several years ago, I read some words about love that have always stuck with me. It was part of one of those email lists that answered the question, “What is love?”

Here was one answer: “Love is when your name is safe on my lips.” The idea was that if I love you, I will speak well of you, and to you.

That word “safety” keeps returning to me. “Acting in love”, to use Paul’s phrase in verse 15, is acting in a way that keeps you safe with me.

I am about the business of guarding you. That does not mean I can make your life perfectly easy. But as well as I am able, I want you to be safe. I want to guard you from harm, because you are my brother or sister in Christ, and you are valuable to me.

How must we guard? We guard our brothers. We keep them safe. We do this, first, by resolving to put no stumbling block in their way.

Verse 13 says, “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.”

So what is a stumbling block? What is an obstacle?

Do you ever turn the lights out in a room, then realize you have to get to the other end of the room, in the dark? You walk carefully, because you know you might run into something you can't see, stumble, fall, and hurt yourself.

A stumbling block, or an obstacle, is something you put in front of your brother, that he might strike against, even to the point of doing something against his conscience, and hurting himself spiritually.

But once again, we reach a point where Paul's words are not as numerous as we would like. Here is the question:

\* Is this an issue of you simply doing something in front of your brother, that would lead to spiritual "injury"?

\* Or is this an issue of you actually getting your brother to do something, that would lead him to spiritual "injury"?

Here is a frequently used example: alcohol. Does my brother stumble when I simply drink in front of him, or does he stumble if he joins me in my drinking?

The answer seems to be in verse 15, where Paul writes of distress and destruction. I believe it's not enough to say, "I won't make him do this with me." I believe we also have to say, "I will not do this in his presence, if he would be distressed or destroyed by this."

"Resolving to put no stumbling block" means that I will give up exercising my lawful freedom for a season, so that I do not distress or destroy my brother. This does not mean that I have to give up that freedom completely. I am still free to exercise that freedom, when I am not with my brother. But when we are together, and my freedom will mean distress or destruction for him, I will resolve to not put that stumbling block in front of him.

Verse 21: "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else that will cause your brother to fall." He may fall, because he may find a way to stumble into some obstacle, all on his own. But I do not want to be involved in his fall. So I will give up my freedom for a season, for his sake.

This leads to the second way in which we guard our brothers: by resolving to keep this before God.

Let's go down to verse 22: "So whatever you believe about these things keep them between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves."

Is Paul saying that we can never speak of any "disputable matters"? No! He is speaking of them, by writing about them!

But he is reminding us of something that we so easily forget. The issues in dispute, are ultimately between us and God. He is the Master of my life. He is the Lord of my heart, and my habits. I need to be straight with him.

So if I keep my beliefs about these things between myself and God, I will not exercise my freedom in a way that would harm my brother. I will not put us in a position where he could "condemn" me, because of what I approve. My focus is on being fully convinced before God, not fully convincing others.

Yet as well, because this is ultimately between me and God, I will exercise my freedom when it would not harm my brother. I am fully convinced that God allows it, so when I am not with my brother, I will do what God allows.

I guard my brother, by resolving to put no stumbling block, and by resolving to keep this before God.

Do you see the attitude here? Do you sense how Paul wants us to think first of the people around us, and less of ourselves? I will not exercise my freedom for a season, because I love my brother.

We are standing in front of the marquee with 11 screens. He believes it would not be right to go to the movie on screen 6. I believe it is okay. With love for him in my heart, I will go to another movie with him.

I am ready for a beer. But he is not, for his heart sinks as he recalls the destruction he has seen in his family, through terrible abuse of alcohol. With love for him in my heart, I will drink root beer.

I am a young person, and the party is starting. Nothing illegal is going on, but this could take a wrong turn. I believe I can handle it. She believes it is best to go. With love for her in my heart, I go.

Now before we go any farther, let me say one more word about this idea of guarding our brothers. Paul is pushing the strong here. But we must never forget the obligations of the weak. Just as the strong can wrongly look down, the weak can wrongly condemn. If I am the weak person, I must be willing to let my brother exercise his freedom, as much as my conscience will allow.

Maybe that's why Paul writes in verse 16, "Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil." The strong will act in love by resolving to put no stumbling block and by resolving to keep this before God, but the weak will act in love by taking care to not overburden the strong with their consciences. In fact, Paul's words here seem to indicate that the strong can defend himself if the weak brother unjustly or unkindly attacks him.

When we have sorted through the details and possibilities, this is still all about safety. We must guard our brothers. Is my brother safe with me?

Yet we are not quite done, because Paul wants to drive this issue right to the deepest commitments of our hearts.

How do we guard? We guard our brothers, and WE GUARD THE GOSPEL.

Have you ever heard the phrase, “Keep the main thing, the main thing”? Maybe you heard it after you wrote an essay in English class, or after you made a speech in speech class. It’s a way of saying, “Don’t let little things keep you from dealing with the big things.”

As God inspired Paul to write, he always led Paul to keep the main thing, the main thing.

As I have said, this is a bit of a frustrating section for us, because we wish some more pieces of the puzzle were here. But the main piece is here. The main thing is here.

Paul writes in verses 17 and 18: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.”

What’s the main thing? The main thing is the kingdom of God, which is built through God’s people living and speaking the gospel. We should wrestle with cases of conscience, but we must always remember that whatever else you are doing or I am doing, we must speak and live the life of God’s kingdom, which is “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

Am I strong? If I exercise my freedom in a way that breaks peace, robs joy, discourages righteousness, and distracts others from the kingdom, God will not be pleased by my exercise of freedom.

Am I weak? If I use my scruples to condemn my brothers in way that ends peace, drains joy, and leads to unrighteousness, God will not be pleased by my attempt to follow him in faith.

Instead, I want to keep the main thing, the main thing. I want people to enter the righteousness, joy and peace of God’s kingdom, as they believe in a Savior named Jesus, proclaimed in the gospel. I want relationships filled with righteousness, joy and peace. I want it for the sake of my brothers. I also want it because I want the gospel to be attractive to unbelievers.

For the gospel, I will forget my freedom. For the gospel, I will graciously respond to the brother or sister who feels more freedom than me.

I will not major on the minors, and minor on the major. I will guard my brother, as a way to guard the glorious gospel we both believe.

Early this school year, Taylor’s class read a book called “The Giver.” It is the story of a young boy born into a place, where everything and everyone is controlled by the people in charge. Everything is perfectly orderly, and all the people conform, but they lose much of what it means to be human.

A boy named Jonas gets to know a mysterious person called “The Giver”, and the Giver slowly shows Jonas what people are missing. At one point, the boy sees a fire in a room, and candles on a table, and a family of people who genuinely love each other. This is strange to him, for in his world, people are just used, then discarded - even by families.

After seeing that love, Jonas says to the Giver, “I do understand that it wouldn’t work very well. And that it’s much better to be organized the way we are now. I can see that it was a dangerous way to live.”

The Giver asks, “What do you mean?”

“Well,” Jonas says, “they had fire right in that room. There was a fire burning in the fireplace. And there were candles on a table. I can certainly see why those things were outlawed.

“Still, I did like the light they made. And the warmth.”

The Lord wants his people to shine the light and warmth of the gospel. Living in community is dangerous. But we are made to relate to God and to each other, and in our terribly lonely culture, we want to draw each other, and others, toward the light and warmth of the gospel, as we demonstrate this spirit of unity.

The main thing is the gospel. Because of the gospel, we accept each other. Because of the gospel, we guard each other.

Is this a safe place? Will this be a safe place? Will this be a place where we dare to guard each other, for the sake of the gospel?