

Avoiding Offenses: What Does the Bible Say?

Scripture: Romans 14-15; 1 Corinthians 8

In biblical terminology, an offense is stumbling (see Rom. 14:13,20, 21). You can *give* offense thus making someone to stumble. You can *take* offense, thus stumbling over something. This topic is also closely connected with Christian liberty, and not using liberty as an occasion to cause stumbling. The Reformers often spoke of *adiaphora*, things indifferent, meaning, these are things Scripture neither commends nor condemns. There should be Christian liberty in such things, though our greatest motive must be in all things the glory of God.

I. Background to the Issue

With the preaching of the gospel by the apostles, and the abrogation of the ceremonial and civil laws, because they were fulfilled by Christ, the church enjoyed a glorious liberty, the liberty of the children of God in the final economy of redemption. The gospel was going forth, sinners were being saved, Gentiles were coming to faith, and both Jews and Gentiles were gathered under the preaching, and in fellowship with each other. Yet, tensions arose because of this new situation, and even the apostles had their difficulties unpacking what this new era meant. Famously, Paul withstood Peter for refusing to eat with the Gentiles on one occasion, while he had become, and while he knew that Christ had accepted Gentile believers apart from obedience to the ceremonial law and circumcision (Gal. 2). And so, the Holy Spirit has given us significant sections of teaching regarding the strong and the weak, scandals (offenses), and using liberty as an occasion to edify (build up), rather than to break down.

Paul's basic point is that the spirit of critical other-condemnation shows not the reality of the gospel, and recognition of God's authority to judge. Instead, we ought to use our critical capacities to help others live out the gospel.

II. General Scriptural Teaching

We should always remember that Scripture does not deal with this issue apart from the magnificent charter of the gospel of free justification by faith alone in Christ alone (Rom. 1-5), and because Christ is no half Savior, the doctrine of sanctification and adoption and assurance (Rom. 6-8), the doctrine of God's plan and purpose with Israel and the Gentiles (Rom. 9-11), and practical Christian living in the church (12) and in society (13). In other words, chapters 14-15 cannot be taken out of context, and we do well to be steeped in the teaching of Romans 1-13 in order to really appreciate and put in proper perspective Romans 14-15. The implication of this is that if we try to deal with differences in the body of Christ head-on without together focusing on, drinking in, and building each other up in the gospel and in Christ, we are bound to wound ourselves and each other, rather than build each other up. *Illustration: Family Life.*

III. Romans 14-15

14:1-12: The weak and strong need to accept each other

- 1: Weak should be received into fellowship but not for just debates
- 2-4: The strong and weak should not judge each other
- 5-9: Each seeks to live to the honor of God
- 10-12: God will be the final judge

14:13-23: We should turn our judging capacities into helping the family of God, strong or weak

15:1-6: Strong, help the weak

15:7-13: Accept One Another

Summary: Paul urges believers, weak and strong, to use their critical capacities to aid one another live in a gospel-centered, theocentric way with the future judgment in view

IV. Practical Implications

1. Beware of anything that puffs you up (1 Cor. 8:1). Knowledge that doesn't help you love others in the body of Christ is vain, dangerous, and not the knowledge that comes from God. Knowledge of God promotes self-knowledge and both humble us to the dust.
2. Remember that God has given to believers in this world the wonderful blessing of a community of blood-bought believers, who are one in Christ, and to serve one another. That is good. If you are a believer, you have infinitely more in common with another believer who is vastly different from you than an unbeliever whom you feel you have a lot in common with. And an unbeliever in the church you should have much love and compassion and seek their salvation.
3. Do not make minor things major things, or major things minor things. On the other hand, do not let minor things that are Scriptural become no-things. It is a mark of immaturity and lack of faithfulness to do any of these things.
4. Use the judging ability that God gives believers by grace pre-eminently to put your own life under the microscope, not the lives of others. Also use the judging ability or spiritual of wisdom and discernment to fight against your true adversary, the devil, the world, and your own flesh.
5. Elders, watch to the flock over which God had set you. Congregation, pray for your elders and don't pretend to be an elder, to act as an elder, or accrue to yourself authority you do not have.
6. Serve other people with hospitality, kindness, prayer, including people you might not feel naturally drawn to. Have the mind of Christ with respect to others in the body of Christ as Christ enjoins, empowers, and provides as a pattern.
7. Pray much for the Holy Spirit to guide people into all truth, both those who are not believers, as well as new believers, backslidden believers, and long-time believers.
8. Study the Scriptures prayerfully, closely, obediently, and grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus.
9. Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to wrath, for the wrath of God works not the righteousness of God (see James 1:9-20).
10. Beware of the devices of Satan to tear the body of Christ, and being a tool in his hand.
11. Cherish the unity of the faith, for the world often knows better how to be united than true believers. Differences in the body are necessary; we should not aim for sameness.
12. Beware of the ditches of legalism and antinomianism. Many times we stare at the ditch we ourselves are least likely to fall into and thus fall into the other ditch. We need to keep fixed on truth and Christ, who is a narrow way.
13. Pray for the reviving grace of God, for when God's Spirit is humbling and refreshing us, we will be less preoccupied with others' fault and focused on God and His glory.