

## 075 What Kind of a Tow Truck Are You?

**Romans 14:13-23**

Message by Dr R Bruce Montgomery ~ Grace Church ~ 6/11/17

**Tow-truck illustration.** On the screen you see a photo of a tow-truck. Not necessarily the latest model, but a tow-truck nonetheless.

How else could we refer to this kind of truck? A nickname we use here in the U.S. is “wrecker.”

Interestingly, if you were to go to England and see a tow-truck you would notice they all have one big word on them: “RECOVERY.”

Hmm. Same vehicle, same mechanisms, same mission – but a totally different perspective. We say, “*There goes a wrecker.*” The Brits say, “*Here comes recovery.*”

We can draw a parallel, I think, when we compare how some Christians operate in the church.

Some people seem to have adopt a “wrecker” mentality, on a search-and-destroy mission ferreting out what is wrong and bringing it to everyone’s attention. They cause more damage to the Body of Christ than good.

Others have a seek-and-save-mentality, pulling damaged people out of the ditch, if necessary, giving them a boost, setting them on the right path and encouraging them to become all God has designed them to be.

We each have the remarkable ability to affect one another in many ways. We can cause other Christians to stumble, we can grieve them, we can even destroy them. Or we can bring encouragement, healing, restoration and recovery to hurting people.

Last week we looked at the first twelve verses of **Romans 14**. We discovered that we don’t have any business judging or demeaning other Christians who have a different perspective than we do on non-essential, debatable matters. We all serve one Lord, we all have the same boss – Jesus Christ – to whom we answer and before whom we will stand and give account.

Paul continues today with the “*so what*” of the first part of the chapter.

**Romans 14:13** *Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacles in your brother’s way.*

As we saw last Sunday, Paul made a distinction between those who were **strong in their faith** and those who were **weak in their faith**.

The “**Strong in their faith**” refers to those who understood their spiritual liberty in Jesus Christ, and weren’t enslaved to diets or holy days.

The “**weak in faith**” were those immature believers who felt obligated to obey legalistic rules concerning what they ate or didn’t eat, and when they worshipped. They clung to the law and didn’t enjoy their freedom in the Lord.

If each one had kept their convictions to themselves, there wouldn’t have been any problem, but they began to criticize and judge one another. Each group was sure the other group was not as spiritual as they were, or they would “get it!”

Often the issue is one of “**tradition!**” as **Tevye cried in Fiddler on the Roof**. All of us have certain traditions that link us with past generations and bind us with other people in our social or religious group.

Many times we don’t even know where such traditions came from! E.g. this week someone asked about frequency of communion at Grace Church. Explained was the third Sunday of each month. Why? I have no idea. It’s the way it was when I came sixteen years ago, and is certainly one of those non-essential matters that isn’t worth arguing about (would be interested if anyone knows the history of the third Sunday).

You may have heard the story about a family who always sliced off the ends of their ham before putting it in the oven. When a girl at a family Easter dinner asked her mother why this was done, mom replied, “*Because my mother always prepared ham that way.*”

That stimulated mom's thinking, so she asked her mother, "*Why did you always cut off the end of the ham before baking it*"

"*Because my mother always prepared ham that way,*" she replied.

The child then asked her great-grandmother about it, who laughed and explained: "*The oven in our first home was so small that a whole ham wouldn't fit in it, so I had to cut off part of it!*"

Understandable or not, our traditions have great value in giving us a sense of identity. We can better understand the issues in **Romans 14** and their application to us today by recognizing the huge power of tradition in our lives.

The Jews in Rome at the time Paul wrote his letter were a minority religious group trying to survive and preserve their identity in the midst of a pluralistic and often hostile environment. They were especially in need of identity – reinforcing traditions to keep themselves and their children from being absorbed into the world around them.

Even those Jewish Christians who agreed in theory that the rules were no longer necessary no doubt had difficulty discarding what was so integral to their cultural and religious identity. It was not easy to throw traditions overboard, however persuasive the arguments for abandoning them might be. Coming from a very strict and legalistic background as a Pharisee himself, Paul could sympathize with them, and urges the other believers to cut them some slack.

But tradition isn't confined to Jews or to ancient history. Traditions are alive and well today, and modern people are just as much affected by them.

We have to recognize that people in Desert Hot Springs who accept the good news and come to church are embedded in cultures and religious practices of their own, and it isn't always easy to give them up. Nor is it always necessary to do so. Many traditions aren't clearly sinful, and when this is the case, Romans 14 encourages us not to make a big deal over them.

We all bring baggage with us that we will never get away from. I know mature believers who refuse, for instance, to drink alcohol, dance or play card games. Not even necessarily because they are sure such activities are wrong, but just because they don't feel "comfortable" doing them.

**Romans 14:14** *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.*

**Romans 14:15** *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.*

**Romans 14:16** *Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil.*

The need to limit the expression of our liberty out of love for God and fellow Christians is a key principle in this chapter. Our culture insists on rights, and it's easy for us to bring that attitude into the church. But the spiritual health of the body is far more important than our rights. The freedom God has purchased for us through his son is a precious gift, but it is a freedom to live as Jesus wants us to live, not as we want to live.

**Jump down with me to verse 20.**

**Romans 14:20,21** *Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. <sup>21</sup>It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.*

Paul reiterates his conviction that all food is clean, but the Christian who is strong in his faith and walking in liberty should recognize it is wrong to eat food or engage in any other activities that cause spiritual harm to another believer.

All things are lawful, or permissible, but all things aren't constructive. Know the difference and thank God for all the wonderful things he has created for us to enjoy. What you do in the privacy of your own home is between you and the Lord. When you are out in public, be aware of the potential effect your actions have on others. Be sensitive to others' reactions and graciously adjust your behavior, yielding your liberty if it hinders or destroys God's work.

He adds an issue that is still relevant today, and that is drinking wine. An issue we can readily understand. Wouldn't offer someone in recovery a beer, or order wine if you were out together for dinner.

**Romans 14:22** *So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves.*

If truth be told, many Christians live in perpetual frustration trying to please everyone around them because they aren't clear within themselves about what they believe.

Examine your matters of conscience and examine Scripture to make sure they aren't a clear moral issue. Discuss them with mature believers you trust. Consider the impact they have on others and yourself, both positively and negatively. Then, once you have settled the issue and aren't second-guessing yourself, you can enjoy your freedom with complete confidence.

But keep your personal convictions about disputable matters to yourselves. You won't need to react defensively, you won't have to convince someone else, and you can quietly allow others to likewise follow their own conscience.

Notice the blessing attached here at the end of **verse 22** for those who don't condemn themselves by what they approve. He wants those who have internalized the truth about the freedom we have in Christ to have clear consciences about the way they use that freedom, not tearing them down but building them up.

What about those who have doubts and are unconvinced about their freedom in such matters? As he says in the next verse, they should refrain from eating.

**Romans 14:23** *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.*

Match your actions to your conscience. While the eating in itself may not be wrong, it is wrong to violate one's conscience.

The weak believer who goes ahead and eats, even though his conscience is telling him not to, wouldn't be eating from "faith," i.e. a firm conviction that eating eat is OK.

In that case, eating is sin, since *everything that does not come from faith is sin*. He is using the word *faith* here (the same as he did in verses 1 and 2) in the specific sense of a conviction that a person's faith allows him to engage in a certain activity.

Turn back with me now to **verse 17**.

**Romans 14:17** *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*

Paul's definition of the kingdom of God here comes like a thunderbolt on those who attempt to forcefully and repeatedly impose their earthly wills on other people.

"The kingdom of God" is a phrase that is used extensively in the Bible. It sometimes refers to the universal sovereign reign of God over all his creation. At other times it refers to the Messianic reign of Jesus Christ from David's throne.<sup>1</sup>

His kingdom is eternal and infinitely superior to the kingdoms of this world, all of which will eventually pass away.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the course of human history God has allowed an individual or group to rise above their peers in power. Their successes bring pride, and God removes them and allows others to reign in their place.

The famous British historian Toynbee wrote that the world has known thirty-four major civilizations, but all have endured only for a time. Egypt was once might, but it fell. Babylon and Persia, Greece and Rome have fallen. The Soviet Union has collapsed. In time the U.S. will succumb to this inevitable law of history and pride and sin will bring America down.

But the church is not to an earthly kingdom. The most important thing to be said of the kingdom of God is that it

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. II Sam. 7:16, Isaiah 9:6,7

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Daniel 2:44

is God's kingdom, the realm in which he rules. The kingdom of God is present in a spiritual sense wherever Christians acknowledge God's rule and reflect his character.

How is that expressed? As Paul explains here. It is ***not a matter of eating and drinking***, what Warren Wiersbe refers to - (slide with **externals vs. eternal**s) as the externals), ***but of*** what Wiersbe calls the eternal**s: *righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.***

Paul is saying that the kingdom of God is evident in what God does in the lives of Christians

This has nothing to do with what we eat (or don't eat) or drink (or don't drink), or whether or not we observe certain days. God isn't concerned about these things, and we shouldn't be concerned by them – except to the extent what we do might hurt someone else.

God is looking for a living, vital faith characterized by righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit -not slavish adherence to a set of man made rules and regulations. Legalism bogs us down in trivia and makes us dull to things that really matter. It contributes to the pride of the flesh and comparing ourselves with others.

Jesus isn't served in that way or with that kind of thinking. He is served when we understand that we are accepted by God through the work of Jesus Christ alone, and are therefore able to joyfully accept and love all others for whom Christ died.

**Romans 14:18 *because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.*** The aim of every believer should be to please God.<sup>3</sup> Is that your goal? If so, you will stop judging other Christians or causing them to stumble and instead live in a way that manifests the grace of God in your own life.

**Romans 14:19 *Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.***

Switch metaphors from tow-trucks to the analogy of building. (*Edification* refers to the act of building). In the New

Testament it is usually used in a metaphorical sense, talking about the process of building up individual believers or the church in faith.

God himself has given us a blueprint, a detailed set of plans on how we are to build a church God's way.

We read in **Ephesians 4:12,13** that the role of spiritually gifted leaders in the church is ***to prepare God's people for works of service, so that that body of Christ may be built up<sup>13</sup> until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.***

This is a watershed text on how to construct and operate a church. It shoots down some popular **alternate models**. There's:

a. **The authoritarian governmental model**, with the pastor perched at the pinnacle of the pyramid, dictating to those below him while the people are arrayed in increasing ranks of inferiority.

b. **The greyhound bus model**, "*sit back and leave the driving to us,*" in which the pastor does all the driving while the congregation are the passengers sleeping soundly and securely in the seats of the bus as we take this road to heaven.

**In the biblical model described here we see a unified body of Christ sharing in the work.**

Those in leadership roles are tasked with preparing God's people to serve, and releasing them to minister. The phrase translated "***works of service***" is literally "***work*** (singular) ***of ministry.***"<sup>4</sup>

The word "*service or ministry*" was originally used of waiting on tables. If you've ever noticed a waitress or waiter in a busy restaurant, they are working hard.

I am proud to be known as a "minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ." I can think of no higher honor. But you know what? I'm not alone. I am in a room full of ministers. Each of you who have believed are also ministers of the gospel!

As Paul says, ministry is work, and it takes all of us working together. No concept of a "docile flock" or "dozing on the bus" or "leaning on your shovels."

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry is service (I like NIV's translation). It is not vying for positions of power, lording it over others, having others wait on you.

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<sup>3</sup> II Cor. 5:9 ***We make it our goal to please him***"

Did you notice the little word “*all*” in **verse 13? *Until we all reach unity. . . and become mature.*** No one gets left behind. No one gets discarded. Everyone is included, Everyone is important.

**Another essential in building God’s Church God’s way is to have the right purposes, goals and objectives.**

What is the goal of building the church? Having a bigger market share? Having name recognition? Gaining the applause of men?

Normally church growth resources concentrate on what will bring about numerical growth. Paul doesn’t even address that, but instead focuses on the goals of growth in unity and maturity.

Paul details the two objectives, the two markers, for the unity we’re shooting for in **Vs. 13 unity (1) in the faith and (2) in the knowledge of the Son of God . . .**

The object of both prepositional phrases is “*the Son of God.*” How much do we trust him, and how well do we know him? This twofold unity – of the heart and of the head – trusting Jesus totally and knowing him fully - is what we’re aiming for.

**The second goal is maturity**

**Ephesians 4:14: *Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.***

Children are lots of fun. Can’t believe the joy it is to be a grandparent many times over! My daughter Beth has given me two, Vanessa four and I’ve “adopted” another dozen from among those who attend Grace Church – ranging in age from 14 months through 19 years old.

But besides being fun, there are certain characteristics of children. They are naïve and gullible. It’s easy to fool them, and to play tricks on them. And besides that, the youngest ones need to have their diapers changed regularly!

Babies are fun, but they aren’t meant to stay that way forever. They need to grow up.

In a similar way, recently converted Christians are fun to be around – they’re excited, eager to learn, nothing hum-drum. But they are also fickle, gullible, easily influenced by the latest book or

fad or popular TV show, and often make messes that require others to clean up after them. Like children, they aren’t meant to stay infants forever. Our delight is to watch and help them grow.

**Ephesians 4:15 *Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ.***<sup>5</sup> The goal of building the church is that the church will grow up to be like Jesus. “*That’s a pretty lofty goal,*” you say. “*Is it even possible?*” It wouldn’t have been set before us if it wasn’t attainable.

Children often fail to realize their potential because the bar is set too low by their family and by their schools.

In the church, we often fail to realize our potential, to be all that God has called us to be, because we settle for less than the ultimate. The standard we are aiming is none other being a fitting body for our glorified Savior, the head of the church.

By God’s grace, may we build such a church. May we be such a church. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> **Vs. 13b** has a similar ring, talking about what we are being built up into in our quest for unity and maturity: *the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*