

Wearing “C” On Your Sleeve

Grey Matters – Part V

Romans 14:16-18

Introduction

Roman artisans, skilled in working with precious metals, developed the ability to stamp coins with figures of emperors, images of thrones, and ornamental designs of fruit, vines, and animals. Along with this artistic work came the development of special tools that were used to create these metallic works of art.

One special tool used for stamping coins was known by a Greek word that passed through several languages; such as, Old French and then, English. The word for this special tool used to make a stamp on a coin was the word “character”. Over time, the word came to stand for both the tool and the mark left by the tool on the face of a coin.

Medieval courts adapted this tool and used a character to literally brand lawbreakers so they would immediately be recognized by their crimes. The letter “M” would be branded into the cheek of a murderer; the letter “T” would be branded into the shoulder of a thief. The person branded with such a symbol was literally marked for life. Anyone could merely glance at the “character” to know about that person’s past.

By the sixteenth century, the word “character” was dissociated from the tool of a metal worker, as well as from the brand letter on someone’s body. It came to refer to the sum total of a person’s qualities.ⁱ

Though harder to spot immediately, without the help of a mark, a person’s character represented who they were. It was the stamp of their disposition; the quality of their nature.

It is interesting to me that we have certain expressions that reveal the visible quality of a person’s character. For example:

- We talk about a person “having a chip on his shoulder”; which means that he is balancing an invisible block of wood on his shoulder and as he walks, he dares someone to knock it off.
- We talk about a person “wearing their heart on their sleeve”; which means that person’s emotions are always visible.

The second phrase originated in the early 1800s as young men wrote the name of their sweetheart on a piece of paper and pinned it on their shirtsleeve. They would wear the paper pinned to their shirtsleeve during the entire week of Valentine’s. Everywhere they went, they openly revealed the girl who had, in effect, captured their heart.

I think that is sweet, don’t you? I think that would be a lot more meaningful than roses and expensive restaurants, don’t you?! I would like some guys to volunteer to do this and then, tell the rest of us whether it worked or not. I will wait to hear back from you!

I find it fascinating that while our character is no longer visible by means of a brand, and the affections of our heart are not pinned to our sleeve, both our character and our heart are exposed just as clearly through our actions and reactions; our attitudes and feelings. A letter does not have to be branded on our cheek and the affections of our heart do not have to be worn on our shirtsleeve for everyone who knows us, or works with us, or lives under the same roof

with us, or sits beside us in class to know the truth. It is time we admitted to ourselves that the condition of our heart is a lot more visible than we probably want to know.

More than anything else, the stamp of our character and the state of our heart is revealed in the way we use our freedom in Christ – the things we choose to do and not do when there are no rules. What do we choose to wear when there is no dress code? What do we choose to watch when ratings do not matter anymore? What do we dream about when there is no record – at least on earth?

To the mind of the apostle Paul, one of the greatest indicators of maturity in the faith was the way a Christian exercised his liberty – specifically in grey matters. If you want to know the character and heart of someone, just watch the way they treat this issue of grace – watch to see whether they ever limit their liberty or restrict their rights, and listen to their reason why!

Paul has begun Romans chapter 14 by opening the barn door with shocking words of liberty to all – “You are free in Christ.”

I have already received comments from people, such as, “Stephen has really taken the lid off this thing . . . I can now do this or that . . . I no longer have to hold back here or cut back there . . . it’s wide open spaces.”

Hold the stampede! If you do not hear anything else today, at least hear this – you are now free in Christ – which does not mean you are now free to do anything you want – you are now free to do everything He wants.

So what does He want, in this wide open pastureland of Christian liberty?

In the latter part of Romans chapter 14 and into chapter 15, Paul gives principles whereby you construct brand new fences; brand new boundaries for your Christian liberty.

One of the boundaries of Christian liberty, which we discussed in our last study, is the principle of protection.

Paul says, in Romans 14:13-15, to protect your younger brother or sister in the faith. Do not put an obstacle or a stumbling block in the path of their growth. They are learning how to walk, so do not throw the debris of your liberty in their path.

In other words, balance your Christian walk with liberty on one hand, and with love for your brother on the other hand.

Principle of Reputation

The second principle Paul delivers to help us know how to use our liberty, without abusing that liberty, is the principle of reputation.

Notice Romans 14:16.

Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil;

The “good thing” Paul is talking about in this verse, is some act of Christian liberty. For you, it is fine to do. However, do not do it if it can be used as a reason to diminish your reputation as a holy child of God; as a person who is pursuing holiness and purity with great passion.

The key phrase, translated in this verse as “spoken of as evil,” is actually one Greek word “blasphemew (βλασφημεω),” which gives us our word, “blaspheme”. We typically limit the use of this word to speaking irreverently of God, but the Greeks used it to refer to speaking irreverently of other people as well.

Paul is giving us the principle of guarding our reputation; that is, we should be concerned about the impression we make on others. We are to remember that we are wearing the letter “C” on our shirtsleeves, as it were – the letter “C,” which stands for Christian.

There is the person who says, “I don’t care what anybody thinks, I have the freedom to do what I think is right.”

This person has forgotten that the most important thing is not necessarily an issue of being right – it may be an issue of reputation.

Paul writes in Romans 14:16:

- Do not let your liberty create an opportunity for libel.
- Do not allow your spiritual freedom to create an opening for the slandering of your testimony in Christ.

You might think of it as going overboard for Billy Graham, but I have read that he would never be in an elevator alone if there was another woman on the elevator. He is that careful of any potential slander to his name and reputation.

I, and all of the pastors on the staff of this church, do not ride in a car alone with a female staff member. That is in no way an indictment on the character of the women on our staff, but it has everything to do with the principle of reputation.

Do we have the liberty to do this? Of course – but the issue of grey areas is not as much what we think, as what others might think.

By the way, whether you are on a church staff or not, be careful in the work setting. It is a setting that by its very nature of close quarters and interdependence, can easily turn friendship and comradeship into affection and the path to great ruin.

You might say, “Oh, come on, Stephen, lighten up. It’s only lunch with that married man or woman from the office. Besides, we’re talking about the latest project at work.”

There can be a very thin line between a business appointment and a date – the development of a friendship beyond what it should be. Be careful; be alert, not only for your own reputation’s sake and what might be whispered behind your back – and the damage to your testimony as a Christian – but for the safety of your own marriage; your own family; your own life.

Solomon wrote of a clean name; the stamp of a clean character,

A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches . . . (Proverbs 22:1a KJV)

How much time do you spend earning your gold? With what kind of care do you guard your bank account? Solomon said that increasing the value of a pure and holy name is more profitable than increasing your wealth.

Paul put it this way, “Don’t let something you have the liberty to do, cast a shadow on your reputation.”

Guidelines on the Principle of Reputation

Let me give some practical guidelines on this principle of reputation.

1. Accept the potential of being watched.

Whether it is by younger adults or children, or younger believers in the faith, it would probably surprise you to know how carefully you are being watched. And not only watched, but copied!

This is the warning that Paul gave to Timothy when he wrote,

. . . in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example to those who believe. (I Timothy 4:12b)

This is a nice way of saying, “You’re being watched! Therefore, be an example!”

2. Admit the power of being an influence.

You are not only being watched, you are probably going to be copied, right?!

When our oldest daughter, who is now eighteen, was only four years old, I was cleaning the garage one day, while she was outside playing with her ball. We had a basketball goal that was lowered for our children, who were all extremely competitive. She was evidently about to try a long shot when she suddenly knelt down on the driveway and loudly said, “Dear Jesus, help me!”

I went outside to see if any neighbors were around – they already wondered about the Baptists!

The truth is, those younger than us – physically and spiritually – will often exaggerate what they see or hear us do. More than likely, someone will take your actions further than you intended them to go in the first place.

Could this be the reason Paul had to tell Timothy to,

No longer drink water exclusively, but drink a little wine for the sake of your stomach . . . (I Timothy 5:23a)

This is a favorite verse for a lot of people. Just ask them about it and they will more than likely quote this verse of scripture.

The only problem is that these people put a period where Paul keeps writing. Paul tells Timothy to,

No longer drink water exclusively, but drink a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments [astheneia: ἀσθενεία]. (I Timothy 5:23)

Paul was telling Timothy to drink wine to clear up his stomach. Evidently Timothy was drinking straight water – not a very wise thing to do in the first century, where water was basically purified by fermentation.ⁱⁱ

Timothy had evidently developed the predictable intestinal problems because of drinking water exclusively. Paul said, “You need the cleansing, medicinal power of wine. Drink a little wine, Timothy.”

Every time someone quotes that verse to me, I am tempted to ask, “So how long have you had stomach problems from drinking contaminated water? Is the water in your house that bad?”

It is what people do not ask that is the obvious question – why had Timothy stopped drinking wine to only drink water?!

Timothy had the liberty to drink wine. The New Testament does not command abstinence. In fact, the only caution given in the New Testament is drunkenness. Paul wrote to the elder candidates,

[Do] not [be] addicted to wine . . . (I Timothy 3:3a)

Do not miss this. Timothy is now an elder, so we can easily conjecture that Timothy was so deeply concerned with fulfilling the qualifications of a spiritual leader in the church that he stayed as far away from wine as he could – even to the point of risking his health!

Timothy understood the power of influence. He understood that he was wearing a “C” on his shirtsleeve. He was evidently limiting his liberty for the sake of godly influence.

It is this power of influence, by the way, and the example of Timothy, that causes this church, to require that teachers, leaders, deacons, and elders limit their liberty as it relates to alcoholic beverages. We accept the potential of being not only watched, but copied.

We do not want a teacher of fifth grade boys to be seen by a fifth grader leaving the local grocery store pushing a cart loaded down with beer. Now that fifth grade Sunday school teacher can argue, “I have the liberty!”

The problem, however, is that his liberty can become a loaded gun. That fifth grader might take a sip the next time someone offers it to him after school, thinking, “Why not? My Sunday school teacher does; my daddy does; my pastor does . . .”

Time magazine, in a November 2004 article, revealed research statistics from the University of Buffalo linking age and alcohol abuse. The researchers found that the younger their subjects were when they had their first drink, the more likely they were to abuse alcohol as adults. In fact, they were able to quantify the risk: for every year earlier that an adolescent took his first sip, the chances of becoming a problem drinker increased twelve percent.

I have had people tell me, “Stephen, it’s an issue of liberty. Furthermore, it’s legal too.”

I would say, “You’re right, it is a grey area. Since it’s legal, it becomes even more an issue of

Christian conviction and liberty. It is something you need to address.”

Ladies and gentlemen, if the only thought you put into these issues are that it is legal and it is your liberty, then when America legalizes – and I believe it will – another dangerous substance, known as marijuana, are you going to one day, teach your children how to smoke it in moderation?

Do not tune me out on this, if your only argument is legality or intoxication. I can argue the medicinal usage of marijuana, and the “buzz” that accompanies it, right? I am not speaking from experience, but even if I were – certainly we can take our marijuana in moderation, right?!

Ladies and gentlemen, let us not turn our liberty into a gun and shoot common sense between the eyes!

When it comes to these and other issues, you can rest assured that I, and every other leader in this church, will by word and example encourage your children to stay entirely away from these things!

We are to:

- Accept the potential of being watched – and what that means;
- Admit the power of being an influence –and what that means.

You are being watched – and you will probably be copied.

Someone in our church told me a few weeks ago, about some family friends. Their friend’s three year old was being taught how to pray in Jesus’ name. She was also being taught the broader principle that everything we do should be in Jesus’ name. One day recently, her mother was telling her to do something she did not want to do. They were going back and forth, until finally, this little girl looked at her mother and said, “In Jesus’ name, no!”

I am sure they had a theology lesson on prayer – right then and there!

Accept the potential of being watched.

Admit the power of your influence.

3. Acknowledge the priority of being a testimony.

Notice Romans 14:17a.

for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, . . .

In other words, the kingdom of God is not represented by people who do or do not eat kosher

meat; the kingdom of heaven is not represented by those who do or do not drink that which has been offered to idols – which is the context of this chapter. Paul tells us what represents the kingdom of God, as we continue to Romans 14:17b,

but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

I mentioned in our last study that Charles Spurgeon, the famous English preacher of the 1800s, smoked cigars. He defended it as his liberty to do so – and he was right. But did you know that Spurgeon quit, just like that, one afternoon? Why? Because one day, as he was riding along in his carriage through the streets of London, he saw a billboard with a picture of a box of cigars and words that read, “These are the cigars smoked by Charles Spurgeon.”

Spurgeon said, in effect, “I will not allow the influence of my name to be used to promote anything other than the gospel.”

These three words – righteousness, peace, and joy – are certainly loaded with theological truth. We have covered each of these words in previous studies in Romans.

Understand, however, that the issue in Romans 14 is not as much belief as it is behavior. It is not the theological truth of these three words that Paul has in mind, but rather, the practical truth. I believe this primarily because of Romans 14:18, which says,

For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable [pleasing] to God and approved by men.

Paul is not talking about salvation – he is talking about service. In other words, evaluate your testimony before others. Can it be characterized on a practical level, by these three words?

Let me ask some hard questions:

- Is what you are doing with your Christian liberty marked by righteousness or impurity?

Paul wrote to the Philippian church,

[to be continually] filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:11)

- Does your walk with Christ create peace or war?

Romans chapter 12 dealt with this issue of getting along with one another in the church.

- Does your lifestyle promote joy or gloom?

Paul refers to the believer’s,

. . . joy in the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 1:6)

and,

. . . the fruit of the Spirit is . . . joy . . . (Galatians 5:22)

Is your life marked with joy?

One author remarked in his commentary that an overly pious man in his church came up to him one Sunday and told him that the New Testament never mentioned that Jesus Christ either smiled or laughed, and therefore, believers should not do so either.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Bible never mentions that Jesus took a bath or combed His hair, but He probably did. That man needed a dose of joy.

Grimness is not a spiritual gift. Sometimes the worst advertisement for Christianity is Christians.

William Barclay wrote, “A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms, and nothing in the history of Christianity has done more harm than our connection with long faces.”^{iv}

We forget that we are wearing the letter “C” on our shirtsleeves – that people may see who we belong to and what we represent!

Romans 14:18 could be turned into two questions:

- Number One: Is your life agreeable in the eyes of God?
- Number Two: Is your life authentic in the eyes of man?

Notice Romans 14:18 again.

For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable [pleasing] to God and approved by men.

This seems like an impossibility – to please both God and man.

You might say, “I thought Jesus Christ told us we were going to be hated by men.”

Didn’t Jesus say in Luke chapter 6,

Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil . . . Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way. (Luke 6:22 & 26)

Didn’t Peter write,

If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. (1 Peter 4:14)

How can we live for Christ and be approved by man?

In the first place, even the most pagan unbeliever will secretly respect the testimony of an authentic believer. The average unbeliever will appreciate the fact that you keep your word, pull your load, tell the truth, and respect your authorities.

However, there will be some who openly dislike you and mock you and revile you.

In either case – you are a pleasing testimony to God and authentic before man.

Donald Barnhouse balanced this application by saying it this way: If nobody thinks you are strange and out of step, you are probably not a good Christian; however, if everybody thinks you're strange, you're probably not a good Christian.^v

Notice that the word Paul used to speak of our reputation before men is the word translated “approved”.

In the ancient Greek world, there was no paper money as we know it today. In fact, until the Middle Ages, all financial transactions were in gold, silver, or base metal coins. There were no standard coin presses, so in order to make coins, the metal was heated until it became liquid and poured into molds where it was allowed to cool. After cooling, it was stamped with that special tool, known as a character.

In addition, the irregular edges of the rough coins were trimmed away. This was not an exact science, of course. The metal was soft because it was not mixed with alloys, so people frequently shaved away the edges and kept the metal. In time, they would collect enough to make new coins.

By the time of Paul, this had become such a common form of dishonesty that the city of Athens

passed over eighty different laws intended to stop the practice. People did not obey the law and over time, so many coins had become so whittled down that the merchants would reject them as lacking their full weight or value. At that point, the coins were said to be “adokimos,” or “disapproved”.

Similarly, the word “dokimos” or “approved” came to represent merchants who were upright and would therefore, neither give nor accept these coins. Their coins were “dokimos,” as were the honest merchants who dealt with honest money.

This is the word Paul uses in Romans 14:18 – the word “dokimos (δοκιμος),” or “approved; honest; authentic; does not cut corners; upright; genuine”.

Paul is saying that when your life is marked by righteousness and peace and joy, then you are an authentic testimony to the name and cause of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

In light of this context, Paul would be challenging all of us – as we decide what we will do and what we will not do – by saying:

- do not overlook the principle of protection;
- do not underestimate the principle of reputation.

With this in mind, some of the grey issues you may be wrestling with will simply take care of themselves.

As you wear the letter “C” on your sleeve – which stands for Christianity; for Christ – do not cut corners – be honest, genuine, upright, and authentic. Wear the “C” without reservation or hesitation; with a sense of boldness and joy, telling the world – not just for the week of Valentine’s, but all year long – whose heart you belong to and of the living Lord who belongs to you.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/5/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Webb Garrison, What's In a Word (Rutledge Hill Press, 2000), p. 37.

ⁱⁱ Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 632.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, Romans: Righteousness from Heaven (Crossway, 1991), p. 269.

^{iv} Charles Swindoll, The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart (Word, 1998), p. 323.

^v James Montgomery Boice, Romans: Volume 4 (Baker, 1995), p. 1784.