

# Do Not Destroy the Work of God

by John Piper

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of loving each other and not destroying the weaker brother by putting stumbling blocks in their way, as Christ died for them and we are motivated to help them get to heaven.*

**Duration:** 41:13

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:33, Romans 12:1-2, Romans 14:2, Romans 14:15, Romans 14:20, Romans 14:22

**Topics:** "Christian Love", "Spiritual Strength"

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## Description

In this sermon, John Piper emphasizes the importance of not putting stumbling blocks or hindrances in the way of fellow believers. He urges Christians to love one another, especially the strong, and not to grieve or tempt the weak with their freedom in matters of food, days, or wine. The sermon highlights that morality and sin are determined by how we handle our weakness and strength, and that it is not wrong to be weak or strong. Ultimately, Piper calls on believers to act in love and help their brothers and sisters in Christ reach heaven, rather than leading them towards destruction.

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## Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from *Desiring God* is available at [www.DesiringGod.org](http://www.DesiringGod.org) Father, this is an unbelievably weighty passage, talking about destroying a brother, destroying the work of God, talking about no longer walking in love, talking about putting stumbling blocks and hindrances in the way of a brother, by which they stumble and destroy themselves, all revolving around meat, vegetables, days, wine. This is strange, and so God, I pray for Your help.

I pray for our church, Lord. Oh, may we listen. This chapter has almost no hearing in the American church.

It is so out of step with the way evangelicals feel and think. I just plead with You that we would hear what is here. We would discern what is here, Lord.

We would be an alien people, exiles, sojourners, thinking another way, marching to the beat of another drummer. So help me, Lord, get it right for the sake of Your sheep that You've called me and others to feed in this flock, I pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Romans 14 is a call to all Christians, but especially to the strong, to love each other. You see that in verse 15? If your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. So this chapter, just like chapter 12, just like chapter 13, and now chapter 14, is an extension of the application of the mercies of

God received in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 12, bent out horizontally to become love in the church.

It's all about how do you love each other? How does chapters 1 to 11 of Romans get fleshed out in churches that love each other? And the issue here is, verse 2, one person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. And you would think, well, that's not a big deal. We can manage vegetables and meat.

And this chapter just vibrates with seriousness of heaven and hell over meat and vegetables. One person thinks it's wrong to eat meat. Maybe meat offered to idols.

Another person, free in Christ, I don't think it's wrong to eat that meat. I'm going to eat it. And Paul says, let everyone be persuaded in his own mind.

But then the issue is, how do you deal with each other? How do you relate to each other in a church when you disagree about things like that? And the weight of this chapter is so remarkable because how we relate about unimportant things proves to be a mega important thing. That's the surprising thing in this chapter. So how do you love? He's already said it numerous times in verses 1 to 13.

The one we closed on last time was verse 13. Let us not pass judgment on one another any longer. There's one way to love.

But rather, let us judge. Want to judge something? Judge this. Never to put a stumbling block or a hindrance in the way of a brother.

So no judgment, no despise, and watch out that you don't do something that becomes a tripping point where he tumbles into destruction. That's what these verses are going to say in just a few minutes. Very ominous, very serious these words are.

Don't put a hindrance. He's on his way to heaven. Looks like he's on his way to heaven.

And you, as a brother, have been died for. He's been died for. Looks like he's been died for.

So join Christ in getting him to heaven. Don't go the other way and make it harder for him to get to heaven with stumbling blocks and hindrances by the way you use your freedom about food and about days and about wine and so on. So what does Paul, in verse 14 now, state as the assumption that helps explain how big this issue is? That's where I'm going.

Verse 14, I'm arguing is now an assumption that he wants to make explicit because without it, his seriousness is just not going to make sense. So listen to what this assumption is, verse 14. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.

That's the apostolic persuasion. I know nothing, and he's talking meat, vegetables, wine, days. He's not talking adultery, stealing.

I know and am persuaded that nothing is unclean in itself. But, but. It is unclean for anyone who thinks it's unclean.

You see what he's explaining? He's answering the question, Paul, how can eating and drinking be such a weighty matter when you yourself know that all foods are clean? So nothing really can be at stake here. All foods are clean. Nothing can happen to you.

If you eat any food, it's clean. You said so. So how can you elevate this matter of eating and not eating to a place where people can be destroyed here? And this is the answer.

Verse 14 is the answer. The foods in themselves are clean. But if for whatever reason you believe eating these is wrong, then when you eat it, you are defiled.

Your conscience is contradicted. You have acted against what you believe to be right. Paul agrees.

All foods are clean. That's his deep conviction. I know and am persuaded in the Lord that nothing is unclean in itself.

He knows that for several reasons. We learn them from elsewhere. We know it because he believes Psalm 24.

Because he quotes it in this context in 1 Corinthians 10, where he says, The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. Therefore, don't give any thought to the kind of meat you eat. It's okay.

He's arguing from an Old Testament. The earth is the Lord. So he's putting Bible underneath this.

Or he could have gone to the teachings of Jesus. Where in Mark 7.15, Jesus says, Nothing by going into man defiles him. And Mark comments in verse 19 of Mark 7, Thus he declared all foods clean.

So Paul's conviction is, yes, all foods are clean. You'd think that would just be the end of the deal, right? That's just the end of the deal. Let's just all get on board.

Shape up. Come on, all you picky legalists. Come on, let's just shape up here.

They're all clean. That's not the way Paul thinks about these disagreements. But, he says, it is unclean.

All these clean foods are unclean. See this at the end of verse 14? It is unclean for anyone who thinks it is unclean. The clean food becomes unclean for me if I believe it is unclean when I eat it.

Now what in the world does he mean by that? In what sense does it become unclean? How can it hurt me? How can this be a problem when you said it's clean? He answers this question and explains it in verses 22 and 23. So let's go there. He's explaining the dynamic of how clean food is in fact defilingly unclean for certain people.

Clean food becomes unclean, defiles, indeed endangers your soul. Verse 22. The faith you have, keep between yourself and God.

He's talking to the strong here. The faith you have, keep between yourself and God. In other words, don't flaunt the faith that makes you free to eat all foods.

Don't flaunt the faith that makes you free to eat all foods. Enjoy that freedom. Enjoy it.

You don't need to show off and push your freedom onto others who don't have the very same conscience you do. Keep it between you and God. You're free to eat this meat.

You see some others around you that are hung up on this meat. You don't need to go pushing into their lives with this freedom of yours. Keep this faith that frees you to enjoy your liberty in Christ.

Keep it between you and God. Don't get pushy here and mash your convictions into other people's lives because you're going to run the risk of destroying them. And we'll have to talk about how in the world that is.

He continues, verse 22. Blessed, blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. That's the goal, isn't it? Let no one be pressed or enticed or pressured into eating what he doesn't approve of eating.

That's the great danger in this chapter. If somebody has a conscience qualm and then somebody else doesn't and they begin to pressure them, whether by example or words, to begin to do what their conscience says, don't do that. How blessed are those who don't condemn themselves and judge themselves for doing what they do.

In other words, how sweet is a clear conscience. I hope you see how this chapter is elevating a life of conscientiousness about as high as it can be elevated. Your not acting against your conscience is about as high a duty in this chapter as it can get.

Verse 23 carries on the explanation. Paul shows that the realities of conscience and faith now yield the issue of sin. Suddenly, at the end verse, the last verse, we realize, wait a minute Paul, you said all these foods are clean.

Let's not talk about sin here. These are clean foods. Let's not talk about sin here.

And sin comes on the table. Why? Let's read verse 23. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats.

Because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. So now you've got perfectly clean food, which it is a sin to eat when you don't eat it from faith.

Because your conscience is saying no, no I don't think so. And you do it anyway. Now we've got the whole picture in front of us of what Paul meant back in verse 14 when he said the clean is unclean for anyone who thinks it is unclean.

Why is that? How does the clean food become unclean? And his answer is because uncleanness does not reside in the food but in the conscience and in the motive. The only thing that can make clean food unclean is when you eat it not from faith. What does that mean? It means not acting out of the overflow of contentment in God.

Not acting out of the overflow of contentment in God. Out of trust, out of satisfaction, out of joy, out of restfulness in God. If you were acting out of the overflow of contentment in God, why would you need to go against your conscience? Why would there be some overpowering desire to do what your conscience is saying? I don't think you should do this.

What would be the motive for doing that if you were resting contentedly and satisfied in God? That's what faith is. Resting in God. You don't need the approval of anybody.

You don't need the physical pleasure that would come through this act that your conscience is telling you not to do. Like that meat would be really good but I think it's wrong. I really want that taste more than I want what? To rest in God and live a life clean according to my conscience.

If we are resting in God we would say, I don't do that. I don't go there. I don't eat that.

I don't drink that. I don't believe it's right for me to do that. And I feel no compelling pressure from you or anybody else that would cause me to want to take my conscience to the slaughterhouse.

I am free not to break my conscience. Because I'm trusting. I'm satisfied.

I'm contented in God. That's what makes food unclean when it isn't there. When we're not acting out of the overflow of contentment in God.

And for reasons that are just gnawing on us, we act against what we feel is right. We act against it. We are saying in effect, I can't get enough contentment, restfulness, satisfaction in God.

I've got to have that. Though my conscience says, don't go there. I've got to go there.

And that's sin. I don't care what you use to do it, no matter how innocent the act is. To act against your conscience is sin, Paul calls it.

Whatever is not from faith, whatever is not the overflow of contentment in God that enables you to hear the voice and contentedly follow it, is sin. Do we want somebody's approval? Do we want the physical pleasure? Now, I find this very illuminating when you reflect on the nature of Christian morality. What is Christian moral behavior? What this text shows us is that moral behavior in the Christian community, moral behavior is not just doing certain things and not doing certain things, like eating meat or not eating meat.

What matters, what makes an act moral, is whether we act from faith. I hope you see, I hope you feel how penetrating this is in enabling you to navigate your life in a way that is pleasing to God. And it doesn't have mainly to do with which of the things you do, but why and how you do it.

Eat or not eat. Be fully persuaded in your own mind. But when it comes to faith, get that one right.

Be contented in God so that there's no overweening pressure and craving from some idol out here to make you cross your conscience. That's not faith working. That's unbelief.

Faith. Is He your portion? Is He your satisfaction? Is He your sufficiency? Is He your treasure? Or do your actions betray a loss of trust and satisfaction in Him? Now I think we're ready to hear the full force of what Paul thinks is at stake in Romans 14. I think everything's in place now that we can begin to understand the amazing seriousness of what is at stake.

Namely, the destruction of the weaker brother and even ourselves. And when I say destruction, I mean hell. I mean perdition.

That word destroy occurs twice. Verse 15. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.

By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. Verse 20. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.

God is doing something in that person's life. Don't destroy it. Those are mighty strong words.

And the natural meaning of those two words destroy, both of them, is final destruction. In other words, if we play fast and loose with another person's conscience, or our own, and encourage them to act against

their conscience, which now we see means acting not from faith, but in unbelief, then we are nurturing in them a hardness of heart and a faithlessness that can, over time, destroy them. The text I read you last time on this was 1 Timothy 1.19, where Paul says to Timothy, Hold the faith, hold to faith and a good conscience.

By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith. That's exactly what's going on here. That's 1 Timothy 1.19, and it's a description of what Paul does not want to happen in this text.

And so he's summoning the strong. Don't do this. Don't put a barrier in their way.

Don't put a stumbling block out there. Don't tempt them towards patterns of behavior which say it doesn't matter if I do what I think it's wrong to do. Don't go there with these people because you can destroy them.

They make shipwreck of faith. Don't do it. Instead, like I was trying to say at the communion table, which I'll say again now for those who are here Lord's Day morning, when Christ dies, there are two things He does.

One is to liberate us from sin, and the other is to make us the servant of other people's getting to heaven. That's what He wants to happen here. Don't put a stumbling block.

Act in love. Help them get to heaven. Don't help them get to hell by your flaunting of your liberty in front of their weak conscience.

Now, how does Paul provide an added incentive to this? And he does it in verse 15 by referring to Christ dying for the weak brother. So let's go there. Talk about that for a few minutes.

Verse 15. If your brother is grieved by what you eat, I think that means if your brother is made miserable with a tormented conscience because you've enticed him to do what he believes is wrong. That's what I think grieved means here.

If your brother is grieved by what you eat, that is, if your brother is made miserable with a tormented conscience because you've enticed him to do what he believes is wrong to do, you're not acting in love. And then he says, by what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. Now, how does that add intensity and weight to the motive to love the brother and help them get to heaven, not help them get to hell? How does that statement, Christ died for this man, how does that work in your mind? I think it goes something like this.

Christ says, I gave up my life to save your brother. Can you give up a little freedom from meat? I think that's the way it's supposed to work in your brain. I gave up my life to save your brother and you, you want to flaunt your little freedom at his peril? Or, put it another way, Christ sacrificed his blood to bring the brother to God.

Will you sacrifice a little food to bring him to God, help bring him to God? Or, put it a third way, Christ surrendered infinite freedoms and infinite rights. Christ surrendered infinite rights to die for your brother. And will you not surrender your little right and freedom? All foods are clean, Paul said so.

Who am I to be bound by another person's conscience? That's not love talking, which means we've got two souls imperiled here, not just one. So I'm suggesting that the way Paul is motivating with the death of Christ is not by drawing attention to the fact that the death of Christ secures the brother so that we aren't

needed in getting him to heaven. Paul doesn't draw any attention to that at all.

He's died for, so he can't perish, so you don't need to worry about him. That's totally not the argument. On the contrary, getting to heaven, now I'm going to go back to the Lord's table.

Getting to heaven in the New Testament involves the use of means. This is what the evangelical church, I think, in America, by and large, hardly ever thinks about. We've got this mechanical notion of eternal security.

You pray a prayer, you sign a card, you do something, and then it's mechanical. It's like a vaccination. You get a vaccination, and now you're inoculated against hell.

Nothing has to be done as a means to get you to heaven. That's all you need, vaccination. That's not the way the New Testament thinks at all.

The New Testament says things like this. He who endures to the end will be saved. Mark 13, 13.

Which means your perseverance in faith is a means of attaining heaven. It's necessary. Romans 8, 13 says, If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

So, warfare against sin is a means of life. Hebrews 3, 13 says, Exhort one another every day that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. So, mutual exhortation is a means by which we preserve each other, strengthen each other, sustain each other, help each other persevere to heaven.

It is not automatic. Christ has died. And now I'm back to the table again.

To purchase heaven for the weak brother and the means of getting there in the life of the strong brother. If it doesn't happen, he didn't purchase it. Christ died to purchase these means and make them effective.

You, strong brother, are the means and focus of this text. The strong brother is viewed as the means of helping the weak brother get to heaven or helping him go to hell. That's the way the text talks.

Christ died to make your love effective in helping the weak brother persevere. So, the cross not only purchases the faith of the weak, it purchases the faithfulness of the strong. Christ died for your brother.

Your love in his life is blood-bought and the evidence that he's bought and you're bought. Your love sustaining him is the evidence he's bought and you're bought. Look how God is preserving and straining and maintaining the faith and the love which he bought with his own blood.

Your love is the life, is his life, blood-bought. Your sacrifice of freedom for his conscience is blood-bought. Love him, love him, and so work out the effectiveness of the cross in saving him.

Prove, prove that by your extension of Christ's love, Christ did indeed die for him. Prove that. Now, I say it like that.

Prove by your becoming an extension, an instrument in the hands of the crucified Christ. Prove that Christ died for your brother by extending the means that Christ bought to get him to heaven. Prove that.

The reason I say it like that is because I am deeply aware, as many of you are, of Romans 8. Where if Christ dies for you, you cannot be destroyed. Let's go there. Romans 8, 32.

He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all. Now that's Christ dying for us. How shall he not also with him graciously give us all things? That's a rhetorical question with an answer implied.

Let's put the answer in. He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up to die for us all, must and most certainly will give us everything that pertains to our salvation. That's what verse 32 means.

If Christ has died for you in this sense, you cannot perish. You cannot perish. Verse 33.

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect for whom he has just now died? In verse 32. Answer, no one. Why not? It is God who justifies.

Who is to condemn? Answer, no one. Why not? And here it comes again. Christ Jesus is the one who died.

That's why the elect cannot be condemned. The elect cannot be condemned because Christ died for them and he does not die in vain for his elect. There's no wasted blood at Calvary for Christ's elect.

So, when Paul says, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died, I think he means you regard him as a brother in Christ and you should. He's made a profession of faith. He's in the church.

He has some evidences of grace on him. And so you believe that Christ died for him, so you should believe that. That's the way you should think about him.

So don't destroy him, this one who in your view was purchased by Christ. Prove, prove that by your extension of Christ's love to him that he is died for. That you will not put a stumbling block in his way.

That you will be a means to his perseverance. Prove that he is died for in this effective way that we have read about in Romans 8. Don't go the other direction. Why would you do that? If you go the other direction, you may show that not only is his soul imperiled as he develops habits of behavior that are contradictory to his conscience and thus is acting out of faith.

But your lovelessness may be testifying. You've never tasted of grace either and you are not in Christ and his blood has not covered you effectually. It may be spoken over both of you if you are not careful what 1 John 2.19 says.

They went out from us because they were not of us. Because if they had been of us, they would not have gone out from us. But they went out from us that it may be clear they were not of us.

And woe to you if that is spoken over your soul because you become so loveless that you prefer your liberty to the weak brother's life. Woe to us if we strong whose consciences are clear to eat anything just burst through life with no loving thoughts about what effect this may have on anyone. So Bethlehem, I just plead with us not to put any stumbling block in the way of a brother.

God will keep his own. Remember verse 4. He will be upheld. He will stand for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Those who are his will stand. But you don't know who they are in the end. Who the false brothers are.

Who are those in this room who are now doing the religious thing and in 10 years they are going to be 10,000 miles from God. You don't know who those are. We are called to love each other and in the

judgment of charity to get our arms around each other as brothers.

Brothers, in the judgment of charity to say Christ died for you and then to prove that he did by my experiencing his power in my life to love you and help you get every obstacle out of the way. And you experiencing the power of the cross to overcome all the temptations to act against your conscience and so to walk by faith instead of walking in unbelief. And that will prove whether you are a true brother or not and whether Christ's blood is really effectually covering you or not.

Oh Bethlehem. So much is at stake in the way we treat each other. He will stand.

The strong brother will love as he ought. The death of Christ will have its trophies. And may that be the story of Bethlehem.

Love your brothers and sisters. More than you love your liberty. Strong Christian.

Father in heaven. There are strong and there are weak in this room. And I love the truth of this chapter.

That strong and weak are not moral categories for Paul. Morality emerges by how the strong and the weak treat each other. It's not wrong to be weak.

It's not wrong to be strong. It's not right, only right, to be strong. Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind.

Morality and sin come into play by how we handle our weakness and handle our strength. That is amazing. Oh God.

Make this a serious church I pray. Help us to walk out of here in a few minutes. With an eye to every brother and sister.

And how we might remove obstacles to heaven. And strengthen the life of faith for the strong and for the weak. Thank you for listening to this message by John Piper, pastor for preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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