

*Whatever Does Not Proceed from Faith is Sin: Romans 14:20-23*

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You may feel like you're hearing some of the same things over and over again as we're taking our time getting through Romans 14. And you would be right in thinking that. There's an overarching message that Paul is getting across in this chapter (and into chapter 15 as well). And he spends so much time on this topic, we know it must be very important.

James Montgomery Boice made this observation about Romans 14. Boice was a well-known pastor who grew up in McKeesport and pastored a church in Philadelphia for over 30 years until he passed away in 2000. Boice spent a long time preaching through this great book of Romans. He said this about chapter 14: "Most of us get impatient with repetition. . . . [But] [t]he fact that something is repeated shows that we need to hear it. . . . [I]f God tells us something once, we should pay attention. It is God speaking. But when he says something twice or even three times, surely we should stop anything else we are doing, focus our minds, seize upon each individual word, memorize what is being said, ponder its meaning, and seek to apply it to every aspect of our lives."<sup>1</sup>

I hope we'll take that to heart regarding Romans 14-15. God is telling us over and over again in this passage that we need to be charitable toward one another, gracious in our differences, pursuing unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ, not judging or despising others due to minor disagreements.

Over recent weeks we've talked about the blessing of Christian liberty. We should celebrate this liberty that we have. We're not required to follow those Old Testament laws that prohibited certain foods and called for the special observance of certain days. Christ has come as the fulfillment of those shadows. He is the substance to which those things pointed. But even as we celebrate our liberty, we must also walk in love. We must be sensitive to others who may not fully recognize the extent of our Christian liberty.

Of course, we're not free to sin. After all, that would not be true liberty. But we are free in many respects which a lot of Christians do not recognize. There are guidelines and parameters that many Christians put around their lives, for various reasons,

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<sup>1</sup> Boice, Romans, 1788.

and we need to be sensitive to those practices even if we, ourselves, do not act accordingly.

For instance, a brother or sister in Christ may be a convinced Sabbatarian. He or she may be fully convinced that the Old Testament Sabbath laws carry over to the present time and are transferred from Saturday to Sunday. Therefore we are to keep the Sabbath by resting from all work on Sunday and foregoing any worldly entertainment like football or movies.

Others, like myself, see this differently. The Sabbath is fulfilled in Christ. Therefore, we keep the Sabbath primarily by trusting / resting in Christ's work on our behalf. The specific do's and don'ts of Old Testament Sabbath observance do not apply directly to us.

What Romans 14 tells us is: Don't let those differences divide you. And the added message is: If you don't observe those things, still be sensitive toward those who do. So if it's a Monday, and I'm with some friends who I know are devout Sabbatharians, I'm probably not going to say, "What an awesome Steelers game that was yesterday!" Nor would I spend much time trying to convince those friends to change their ways.

I wouldn't want to pressure them to go against their convictions, even if I think their convictions are misinformed. I wouldn't want them to act contrary to their conscience. I wouldn't want to be a cause of stumbling.

And that leads to the first main point for this morning. As we're continuing through this passage, and as we reach the end of chapter 14 this morning, there are three things I want to focus on in these last few verses. The main message continues, but there are some additional significant details to explore. The first point is: Don't be a cause of stumbling. Secondly, Be mindful of conscience. And thirdly, Act from faith.

### **Don't Be a Cause of Stumbling**

One of my points last week was that we should build up rather than destroy. This is one of the reasons we ought to consider restraining our liberty. In certain contexts, our desire to walk in love and harmony with fellow believers will compel us to limit the exercise of our Christian freedom. Because there are things more important and more precious than our Christian freedom, one of them being the spiritual growth of our brothers and sisters.

We saw this in verses 13, 15, and 19.

*“Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.” (Romans 14:13, ESV)*

*“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.” (Romans 14:15, ESV)*

*“So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” (Romans 14:19, ESV)*

And now we see this again in verse 20. And notice the stark contrast between verses 19 and 20.

Paul states again in verse 20 that “Everything indeed is clean.” He said the same thing in verse 14, “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.” This may have been a kind of slogan used by those who are called the “strong,” those who exercised their liberty by departing from the ceremonial laws. They ate the meat, drank the wine, etc. They believed, “Everything is clean.” The clean / unclean food distinctions made in the Old Testament, those things are not requirements for us any longer. And Paul agrees.

However, that’s not the main point here. There’s something deeper here that we need to learn. It’s a somewhat complex reality that we need to be aware of. We’re going to get to the matter of the conscience in a moment. But first we need to hear the simple exhortation of verses 20-21, not to be a cause of stumbling.

How would my actions be a cause of stumbling to another believer? And remember, we’re not talking about sinful actions here. We’re talking about actions that are perfectly legitimate, completely permissible, appropriate exercises of Christian liberty. How could such actions be a stumbling block to fellow believers?

Well, this takes us back again to the original context of the Roman church in Paul’s day. Before we can apply this to our own situation, we need to have a perspective on what was going on in the first century church. The Old Testament did not prohibit the eating of meat entirely—only certain meats. So the fact that a group of believers in Rome had become vegetarians points to something unique about that situation. It must have been that kosher meat was not readily available, or that it was difficult to know if the meat was truly kosher, prepared in a kosher manner.

So if certain believers, the “strong,” were to eat meat in the presence of the “weak” believers, that could be a really

troublesome predicament for the weak believer who thinks that eating the meat would be defiling. The weak Christian, in this context, has decided to eat only vegetables, and they've chosen to do so out of a desire to honor the Lord.

Paul addresses some similar issues in 1 Corinthians 8-10. I'm going to quote from that passage a few times this morning. The specific problem in that context was meat that had been offered to idols. Paul makes the point in 1 Corinthians 8 that idols have no real existence. And he writes, "We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do." In other words, everything is clean. But he also goes on to say,

*"But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple [later he says that it would be wrong to do this, but hypothetically], will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." (1 Corinthians 8:9-13, ESV)*

So even if there's freedom to eat the meat, Paul is committed not to eat it out of deference to the weaker brother.

In our passage in Romans 14 for this morning, in verse 20, he also mentions the drinking of wine. When we hear that, we quickly think of alcoholism and the danger of causing a recovering alcoholic to stumble. But that's probably not the main thing in Paul's mind. Remember, the issue in the church in Rome had to do with clean and unclean foods. And wine was commonly used in the pagan temple rituals. So these Christians who avoided meat were also avoiding wine out of desire to avoid anything that they would consider to be defiling.

Paul's next phrase in verse 21 broadens this exhortation considerably. He says, "It is good not to eat meat or drink wine [and then he adds] or do anything that causes your brother to stumble." This is where we each, individually, need to think of the believers who are closely connected with our lives, and consider whether there's anything we might be doing that would be a cause of stumbling. Maybe drinking a beer or a glass of wine, in certain contexts, would be troubling to a recovering alcoholic, or someone who had a parent who was an alcoholic. That person believes it would be wrong to have a drink, but you're putting undue pressure on their conscience.

Maybe, just for fun, you challenge someone to a small bet: “winner buys lunch.” But for the person who has struggled with a gambling addiction, that becomes a crisis of conscience. We can also think about the way that we dress. There are a lot of provocative images on magazine covers, billboards, internet advertisements. And while you’re certainly free to dress in an attractive way, you should be careful that you’re not dressing immodestly, in a way that would cause those around you to stumble. You don’t want your appearance to become a temptation to others. You don’t want to become an object of lust.

It could be that the music you listen to has a tearing down effect on Christians around you. You’re free to listen to many kinds of music, but if a fellow believer is troubled by certain things you listen to, be sensitive to that. Or certain things you read or watch.

Give some thought to this personally. Think about your own life, your activities, and how those things affect the believers around you. Remember, we want to build up rather than tear down. We don’t want to be a cause of stumbling.

### **Be Mindful of Conscience**

To understand this issue more deeply, we need to be mindful of conscience. Paul doesn’t use the word “conscience” here in Romans 14, but that’s what he’s talking about verses 22-23. Paul did refer to conscience in those verses I read from 1 Corinthians 8. He wrote, *“Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.”*

And then in 1 Corinthians 10, he describes this scenario.

*“Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience [meaning, don’t ask if it was offered to an idol or not]. For “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.” If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you [and I think this would be another Christian at the meal, a believer with a weak conscience], “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience—I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else’s conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?” (1 Corinthians 10:25–30, ESV)*

So what is this thing called conscience? Well, it's basically that intuition that God put inside of you that tells you what is right and wrong. Paul mentioned this in Romans 2.

*“For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them”* (Romans 2:14–15, ESV)

We all have an internal sense of right and wrong. There is an inherent knowledge of God, and of God's standards, which sinful humanity suppresses. But it's there nonetheless. When we do something wrong, our conscience is pricked. Even as an unbeliever, you know that you shouldn't have done that. You know it was wrong. Not all the time, of course. But at least some of the time. It's certainly possible for the conscience to be seared, and for the truth to be suppressed. But still there is this reality that God has placed a moral compass within each person.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul writes about the great value of a good conscience, and the danger of a seared conscience.

*“The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”* (1 Timothy 1:5, ESV)

*“This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this [referring to a good conscience], some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.”* (1 Timothy 1:18–20, ESV)

A good conscience is a very precious thing, and we put ourselves in great danger when we violate our consciences. John Stott writes, “if we disregard the voice of conscience, allowing sin to remain unconfessed and unforsaken, our faith will not long survive” (*Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*, 57).

Now returning to Romans 14, the shocking truth that we need to be aware of is that a person can violate their conscience without even engaging in an activity that is inherently sinful. Let me say that another way: You don't have to be lying or cheating or stealing or committing adultery to sear your conscience. It may be a perfectly legitimate activity, but because it's questionable in your

conscience, it would be damaging to your conscience to do it. It doesn't have to be wrong, in and of itself, but it's wrong for you because you consider it to be wrong.

This is the complexity of the human conscience. Let me share with you a couple illustrations I came across. Imagine a child comes into the kitchen to find freshly baked cookies cooling on the table. The child looks this way and that way, and then grabs a cookie and runs outside to eat it. Later the child feels bad about this and confesses to mom, "I'm sorry I took the cookie. I should have asked you first." And mom says, "Oh, don't you remember. I told you this morning that you could have a cookie once they came out of the oven." Was the child in the wrong? Well, taking the cookie wasn't wrong, in and of itself. The child, in fact, had permission to do so. But the act of taking the cookie was rebellious, and was a violation of conscience, because at that moment the child was under the impression that permission had not been given.

Or imagine you're at work and you see a wallet on the floor. You quickly glance this way and that, and then you grab the cash out of the wallet. A little while later you realize that the wallet on the floor belongs to you. It had fallen out of your pocket. Was it wrong to take the cash? On the one hand, it was not wrong to do so. It was your money. But when you took the money you were assuming it belonged to someone else, thus making the action sinful and a violation of conscience.

There are many possible scenarios of this in the Christian life. Maybe you grew up in a Christian tradition that really looked down on dancing. Dancing was seen as something that came from the Devil. Or maybe God saved you out of a partying lifestyle in which dancing was associated with a lot of immoral behavior. Is dancing inherently sinful? No. But for either individual I just described, it could be damaging to their conscience to participate in any kind of dancing. The same could go for playing cards or drinking alcohol or wearing jewelry or doing some work on a Sunday.

### **Don't go against your conscience.**

There are a few layers of implications here for us. First of all, there's the very important message to all of us: Don't go against your conscience. It would be very harmful to go against your conscience. Even if your conscience is not fully informed. Think of your conscience like the sensitivity of your skin and way that those nerve endings can register the feeling of pain. Just think of all the bruises and scrapes and burns you would have if you

didn't have that sensitivity to feel pain. You would destroy yourself.

Well, the conscience alerts us to the destructive power of various things. It cringes when a wrong action is presented before us. It inflicts feelings of guilt when we have done something wrong. And by so doing, it keeps us from destruction. So don't go against your conscience. Because if you repeatedly go against your conscience, you will become immune to those warnings.

### **Don't pressure another believer to go against conscience.**

A second implication here, which we're told directly, is not to put pressure on another believer to go against their conscience. If there's an activity we recognize to be OK—it's not harmful, not sinful. But if that activity pricks the conscience of my brother, the last thing I want to do is twist his arm to make him do something that violates his conscience. Even if, from my standpoint, it seems that his conscience is a bit confused, it's still better for him to obey his conscience.

I remember, years ago, being at a science exhibit where there was a display of what is called the thermal grill illusion. There are alternating warm and cool coils. The warm is not hot. The cool is not cold. But when you put your hands on these alternating coils, so that you're touching both warm and cool coils, it creates a burning sensation. It feels like your hands are on a stove top, so you pull back. But then you touch the coils one by one and realize it's just warm and cool. It's a trick. It's confusing to the senses. And for that particular scenario, one realizes, "I shouldn't trust my senses." But if you're tricked again and again, and you begin not to trust your senses in other scenarios as well, it could end up being really harmful.

A similar thing could happen if we pressure others to go against their conscience. If we tell them, "Don't listen to your conscience. Just listen to me." That's going to erode their ability to discern right and wrong. Instead, as Paul instructs in verse 22, "The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God." It's OK for you to exercise the freedom you recognize that you have. But don't flaunt that before others. And definitely don't try to coerce others to conform to your viewpoint.

### **Seek to educate the conscience.**

A third implication here, though, is that we should all seek to educate our conscience. John Stott, in his commentary on Romans, observes that "alongside this explicit instruction not to



violate our conscience, there is an implicit requirement to educate it.”<sup>2</sup> We have seen Paul’s comments that all things are clean. He adds to that in the second half of verse 22, “Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.”

There is blessing in having a conscience that is increasingly informed by God’s Word and increasingly aware of our Christ-bought liberties. This takes time, though. It’s not going to happen all at once. And it’s never going to happen perfectly in this life. So as we think about our own conscience and the conscience of other believers around us, let’s realize that this is going to be a process that requires much patience and sensitivity. It’s not that we can read one article or have one conversation, and then we “get it.” It’s going to be an ongoing development of having a conscience that is enlightened by Scripture.

I have an aunt and uncle who live in Idaho. And my uncle, in his retirement, has taken up the hobby of boat building. He has completed one boat and is now working on a second. I thought of him this week because I remembered him describing the process of forming the side boards of the boat to fit the frame. I wrote him this week to ask more about it. He said that he actually uses already pliable planks. But there is a process that many use which requires a steam box. You take the plank, which is rigid, and you steam it for a period of time. Then it’s sufficiently pliable to fasten to the frame of the boat and it cools and hardens in its new shape.

I think of that as a good picture of how the Christian conscience needs to be formed. If an insensitive Christian tries to bend the rigid board of a weak believer’s conscience, it may very well break. But through Bible reading and prayer and mentoring by godly individuals, the conscience will, over time, become more aligned with God’s design.

### **Act from Faith**

The final point is that we must act from faith. Look at 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.” This verse shows us that sin is much deeper than actions. That’s a very important point to understand in order to grasp the real message of the Gospel.

You know, many of us really just want a list of rules to obey. After all, that would be simpler. It seems more objective. It’s clear. It’s easy to monitor success or failure. But verse 23

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<sup>2</sup> Stott, Romans, page 368.

really gets to the heart of the matter. It's way more than rules. Because you can keep a whole bunch of rules and still be completely in sin. That's because whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. And there are plenty of "good" things that people do every day that do not proceed from faith. The illustration Steve Schumacher likes to use is walking an elderly lady across the street. That's a nice thing to do. But it's something that is often done apart from faith, which means that kind act is, in fact, sin. I think that's a good illustration to show just how radical this verse is. WHATEVER does not proceed from faith is sin. Unbelievers may do a great deal of kind things, but since they are doing those things apart from faith in Jesus Christ, it's just sin.

Paul, himself, was an example of that very thing before God saved him. Paul had all the religious credentials imaginable. He had lots and lots of good deeds. But he later recognized that is was just rubbish. None of those things arose from faith. What he needed was not some righteousness of his own earned by law keeping. He needed the righteousness of Christ that is received by faith (see Philippians 3).

So if you came here today thinking that your church attendance, or some money that you might put in the offering plate, means that God's going to put a big gold star next to your name, you need to think again. Or if you think that your avoidance of certain activities means that God's going to put a big gold star next to your name, you need to think again.

It's not just about what you do or don't do. In fact, if your hope is in what you do and don't do, that's a pretty clear indication that your hope is NOT in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Being a Christian is about trusting (having faith) in what Jesus did for us. He lived a perfect life, died on the cross, and rose from the dead on the third day. And for those who are resting in that accomplishment, resting in Him, we have our sins totally erased. He paid the penalty for all our sins—past, present, and future. So then we can live our lives from faith. We act from faith. In everything we choose to do and everything we choose not to do, it should be from an attitude of joyful trust in the Person and work of Jesus.

To quote one last time from that passage in 1 Corinthians, Paul summarizes it so well in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." That's the life of faith. That's acting from faith. We are overjoyed by the forgiveness and fruitfulness and fulfillment that is ours because of Jesus that we simply want our lives to be a reflection of

God's glory. We want others to see how great God is, and how wonderful this Good News is. And that all-consuming passion in our lives will guide our many, many decisions of how to relate to our fellow believers. We don't want to cause others to stumble. We want to be mindful of conscience. And in everything we do, we want to act from faith.