

The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Romans 14:13-23

"No Stumbling Blocks through Christian Love"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] And our subject for this morning is "No Stumbling Blocks through Christian Love" and our text is Romans chapter 14, verse 13 through verse 23. So, will you turn with me to Romans chapter 14 and verse 13 through the end of the chapter? The apostle is dealing with the subject of doubtful things or as others have put it, debatable things, things that are unmoral in themselves, but which have moral connotation by virtue of differences of opinions that prevail with regard to them. And in a few moments I'll try to bring us up-to-date on the opening of the discussion in chapter 14, but our Scripture reading for this morning begins with the 13th verse. And the apostle writes:

"Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way. I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. (Of course it is obvious the apostle is not speaking about things concerning which the word of God has specifically said that they are unclean, but about things that are morally indifferent. Verse 15): But if thy brother be grieved with thy food, now walkest thou not in love. Destroy not him with thy food, for whom Christ died. (The Authorized Version has rendered this word "meat" and it is a reasonable translation, but a meaning which the word does not have today. The word is a more general word and "food" is better than "meat". Verse 16): Let not then your good be evil spoken of: For the kingdom of God is not food and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things with which one may edify another. For food destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence. It is good neither to eat meat, nor to drink wine, nor anything by which thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak. (Incidentally the word in verse 21 is not the same word as that rendered above "food" but is a word that means something like "flesh". Verse 22, Paul concludes his discussion in the 14th chapter by saying): Hast thou faith? Have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. But he that doubteth is condemned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin. (That last clause is one of the most important statements in the Bible on the nature of sin). For whatsoever is not of faith is sin. (The Bible, I think, makes it very plain that the essence of sin is unbelief. It manifests itself in immorality, or manifests itself in rebellion which issues in immorality. But the essence of sin is unbelief. That is unbelief of the word of God. And the apostle says much the same thing here in a negative way by saying) whatsoever is not of faith is sin."

May the Lord bless this reading of his word.

[Message] The apostle in Romans chapter 14, verse 13 through verse 23 is dealing with the nonessentials, that is, things that are not necessary for salvation. He

deals with the question of the Christian's relationship to certain foods, certain festivals or certain days, called also doubtful matters, or debatable things. And last week in our studies, we made mention of the fact that Christians have as one of their favorite indoor sports trying to change others in regard to these things. So our subject today is "No Stumbling Blocks through Christian Love".

The apostle began this subject in chapter 14 in verse 1 and he will not conclude it until he reaches verse 13 of the next chapter. What he has said so far is essentially this: Strong Christians are those who do not have scruples concerning morally indifferent things. Weak Christians are those who have scruples. We are inclined to think it is just the opposite, that the strong Christian is the one who has certain scruples and does not do this or does not do that, observing the well-known Christian taboos not expressed in the word of God but given out by certain segments or individuals of the Christian company. Weak Christians are those who have the scruples, and so the apostle has made the point that the strong are not to despise the weak for the failure to understand the Christian's true freedom. Nor are the weak to condemn the strong because, in their minds, the strong in their freedom tend to, what they might call, a licentious or antinomian way of life.

The apostle points out that the true view of things is that we all live in a slave-lord relationship. That is, we're all the servants of the Lord Jesus Christ and he is going to settle matters. In fact, the apostle sums up things in verse 10 through verse 12 of chapter 14 by saying:

"But why dost thou judge thy brother? (Now, that is a reference to the weak believer.) Or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? (Or despise thy brother, that is a reference to the strong.) For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. As it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us (He's speaking about Christians) shall give account of himself to God."

Therefore, we as Christians should be careful not to judge other Christians or despise other Christians because we have different views of these debatable things or these morally indifferent things.

Now of course if the Bible has spoken on a point, there is no arguing about that. Things that are said in the Bible to be unclean, or wrong, are unclean and wrong. For example, while the Bible does not ever say that it is a sin for a believer to take a drink of wine or a drink of alcoholic spirits, it does speak very strongly against drunkenness. And so regardless of what we may say, drunkenness is wrong. Now the other questions are questions that are morally indifferent, that is, those things that are not specifically forbidden by the word of God.

It may be wise for us to observe some taboos. Certain implications of things may lead us to honestly have an opinion with regard to them that might be a wise opinion. But it is well for us to remember that so far as the word of God is concerned, we are responsible to the things that are spoken or things that may be clearly inferred from the teaching of the word of God. In morally indifferent matters, in debatable matters, well, the apostle tells us that we have freedom, but our freedom under certain circumstances should not be exercised.

Now, the apostle classifies himself as one of the strong. He does not side with the weak and say I'm one of the weak. He, in effect, says I'm one of the strong in the first verse of chapter 15, he says: "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, (those who have scruples) and not to please ourselves." Furthermore he says in verse 14, "I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself," so again he ranges himself on the side of the strong.

In verse 20 he says, "For food destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure;" but he goes on to say: "it is evil for that man who eateth with offence." So the apostle, and in other places as well, points out that, so far as he is concerned, he is one of the strong; he is a man who has truly Christian freedom.

One might ask, well, what is the point of this section so far as we are concerned? For we live in the United States of America in the year 1981, what application have ancient questions concerning the eating of certain meats and the observance of certain ritual days have to us? Well perhaps not directly are those things relevant to us, but other things of a similar character are. Anyone who has been a Christian very long knows that in the company of believers, there are those who have many, many scruples over various types of things, and frequently in some parts of the country, certain scruples obtain whereas in other parts, different scruples obtain.

For a long time, and I think still, in many parts of the Christian world it was thought to be a sin to attend a movie, or to go to an opera. It has been thought to be a sin to have wine touch lips, even just a simple glass of wine. It has been thought a sin in some companies of Christians for women to wear lipstick. It has been a sin, regarded as a sin in many communities of Christians, for tobacco to be used, for playing cards to be used, to look at TV even, to work on Sunday. And as Ray Stedman said in his book I mentioned last week, "to use zippers instead of buttons." Some are ridiculous taboos, and ridiculous scruples, and some are rather serious, but they are morally indifferent things in the sense that the Scriptures do not speak with reference to them.

Martin Luther in one of his significant works on the freedom of a Christian man has said in the opening of that work, "A Christian man is a most free lord of all, subject to none." But then he goes on to say shortly afterwards, "A Christian man is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all." So he is a most free lord of all, subject to none. He is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all. I think that's a kind of clue to the apostle's teaching here. We as Christians are free, but our freedom is to be bounded by the more significant bondage that we have to our fellow believers, and there are some things that we have perfect freedom to do according to the word of God that we may freely not do for the sake of other Christians who do not yet understand the freedom that we have as believers. Sometimes [we] are not willing to understand the freedom that we have as believers. Well that's a rather lengthy introduction, but I think it will be helpful to us as we look through this passage which the apostle has written.

He begins with an exhortation against injuring weak consciences. Now I think that probably these words are addressed both to the strong who understand freedom and to the weak who have scruples, but the primary thrust of them seems directed more to the strong than to the weak. He begins verse 13 by saying "Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way."

Perhaps it would be wise for me to remind you of the background of Paul's words. Most of the believers in the earliest church were believers who either had been Jewish in their faith or had had an association with Jewish people. And so therefore, they understood the Jewish food laws of the Old Testament. Now in the Old Testament, a Jewish man was forbidden pork, any form of pork. He could not have bacon for breakfast. He could not eat ham. Furthermore, he could not eat meat in which blood was. And then also, he could not even eat beef or fish or chicken unless the food had been prepared according to certain methods, or as we say today unless it was kosher. So you can understand what might have happened when a Jewish man, and the early church was almost entirely Jewish, when a Jewish man became a Christian.

I said last week, somewhat facetiously, I would like to have seen the Apostle Paul's face when someone first handed him a ham sandwich. Because he knew he had freedom and yet with all of that tradition of the avoidance of pork, I'm sure that his face changed several colors or went through several colors while he stood looking at that ham sandwich before him. Now I think it would have been even more revealing if someone had given him a piece of bacon, but that's my own personal preference. I happen to like bacon better than almost anything else.

The Jerusalem council regarded this as a problem too, and you'll remember that in Acts chapter 15 when the council took place and they discussed the question of salvation by grace, they came to the conclusion that the gentiles may enter into the Christian family on the same basis that Jewish people did. And Peter pronounced the viewpoint of the council when he said "But we believe that through the grace of the LORD Jesus Christ we (that is we Jewish people) shall be saved, even as they," that is the Gentiles. So the question of the equality of Jew and Gentile in the one body was finally settled there, but after the council had made that decision, they went on to lay down some scruples, the observance of which was important in those days. For they said:

"But that we write unto them, (that is James is speaking, he says my judgment is) that we trouble not them, who from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood."

In other words, James says it would be wise because of the Jewish scruples that Gentiles observe these things. And finally when the letter of the decision went out, it contained these words: "That ye abstain from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well." So they understood the scruples, and they understood the problems that would arise when Gentiles who were converted begin to eat pork in the midst of the Jewish believers who had not yet come to a full understanding of Christian freedom from the Mosaic law.

Therefore, you can understand why the apostle writes here in Romans 14 about these scruples. Most of the meat that was sold in the ancient cities, such as Corinth and Rome, in those days was meat that had been offered to idols, Gentile idols. It would be offered to idols and then the priests of these religions would take the meat and that which was not offered, they would sell it to the butchers and the butchers would then put it on sell in their butcher's shops. And the Christians were posed with a problem. Shall we eat

this meat which has been offered to an idol? Now Paul deals with that also in 1 Corinthians. It was a question you see that touched a person's scruples. The weak were those who said we cannot eat this. The strong, who understood that all things were pure, were able to eat it. But when a strong person ate it in the presence of a weak, it was obviously the case that that became a problem for the conscience of the weak person. That's what Paul is talking about here.

Now first of all, he says in verse 13, that there is a decision that we are not to come to and there is also a decision that we are to come to. "Let us not therefore judge one another any more:" This is a play on words and the figure of speech is antanaclasis in which the word judge is used in two senses. In the first sense, it has the force of to criticize. "Let us not therefore criticize one another." But in the second occurrence, "but judge this rather," it means to make this determination. So don't criticize one another, but make this judgment, or make this determination. Strictly speaking, the word "to judge" is a Greek word that meant literally "to come to a decision". So we could say, spelling it out and paraphrasing it: Do not come to a decision with reference to one another anymore, but come to this decision, that is "that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way." In other words, don't do anything that will cause a brother to stumble, that will cause him either to do something he would not feel that he has freedom to do, or cause him because he will not do it, to be critical of the man who has freedom. Avoid these things, the apostle says. So this is an exhortation against injuring weak consciences. He says "no man should put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way."

Well, that of course would raise some questions. Why do you say this, Paul? And so he now offers a few arguments for a consideration of the brother, arguments for Christian love, arguments for loving consideration. I say this remembering, of course, that the apostle took the position that the strong were really right biblically. In other words, freedom is the Christian's standing.

Now in verse 14 he states the principle of Christian freedom. "I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." So the apostle states that there is nothing unclean of itself. It is perfectly all right to eat meat sacrificed to idols, for it is just meat. But in the case of a situation in which another brother does not understand that, you may give him an occasion for stumbling. And in that case then there are other considerations that enter in. And if a brother esteems that it is wrong to eat such meat, for that brother it is unclean or wrong to eat it, for in that case, he is violating his conscience. In effect he says, this is what God teaches, that's what I believe. He teaches this, but I still go ahead and do it. And even though it is all right, he has taken the position of despising the word of God in his own mind, for he thinks it's the word of God, and thus he is guilty. So Paul says "to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." That's the limitation of Christian freedom. Freedom we have, but it is limited by an individual's understanding of what is free. He refers here of course to those who are doubtful and to the weak brethren who have scruples.

A principle of love is to govern the strong however, and that is what he begins to expound in verse 15. "But if thy brother be grieved with thy food, now walkest thou not in love. Destroy not him with thy food, for whom Christ died."

Now this is a most interesting statement, and it has a number of interesting things in it. I wish it were possible for us to deal with it for an hour or so. When he says in verse 15 "If thy brother be grieved with thy food," he means if the brother who has scruples is disturbed by a strong person eating or drinking things that he feels are wrong, and thus, he is grieved over his brother's display of licentious living or wrong living. So, the grieving is the grieving of the weak brother who thinks, for example, that it is wrong to eat meat sacrificed to idols, or in our day, it's wrong to go to a movie, it's wrong to be seen in a theater, it's wrong to look at TV, it's wrong to work on Sunday, it's wrong to look at a football game on Sunday afternoon. So, the apostle here says if your brother is grieved with what you do, you're not walking in love toward him when you do it knowing that he feels that way about it. "Destroy not him with thy food, for whom Christ died."

Now this raises another question. This raises the question of the eternal security of a believer. Is it possible for us to destroy a believer, for he does call him a brother? He says "if thy brother be grieved with thy food, now walkest thou not in love. Destroy not him (that is the brother) with thy food, for whom Christ died." In fact, this is such a clear argument for the doctrine that we may be saved and then lose our salvation that some Arminians have said this is a *dictum pro bonis*, that is, it is a statement that proves that doctrine.

And that raises a number of interesting questions, and again I say I wish it were possible to deal with all of them. I suggest, if you never have, that you listen to some of the tapes on the doctrine of eternal security in which some of these questions are brought up and discussed more fully. What Paul is doing is simply giving a warning. And you must remember that when the apostle warned, he warned professing groups of believers. And so when he says "Destroy not him with thy food, for whom Christ died," this is addressed to professing believers. As far as the believers are concerned, it is impossible to destroy them. As far as professing believers are concerned, it is possible to encourage them in a line of activity that will lead to their ultimate ruin or destruction.

The warnings of the word of God addressed to believers are means to their preservation in the faith. Just like prayer. Some people raise the question occasionally: If God has determined, he works all things according to the counsel of his own will, what is the point of prayer? Well it is by means of prayer that God accomplishes his purposes. He has determined that all things transpire in accordance with his will, but he has determined that they transpire through prayer, through preaching, through the word of God. And so the warnings of the Bible addressed to a professing group are warnings to those who only profess, that if you persist in a certain activity, it will lead to ruin and destruction.

But those warnings are designed by God to be means by which he preserves the faithful in their faith. So the warnings have a twofold purpose. And here it is a warning addressed to a whole spectrum of those who profess faith in Christ. If a person who is not a believer persists in this kind of activity, it will lead to his ruin and destruction. But so far as believers are concerned, the warning is edifying. It helps him. It keeps him in his state of the faith of God.

Now that is evident from the fourth verse, because in the fourth verse the apostle has said "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be held up: for God is able to make him stand." In other words, in this very chapter we have evidence of the fact that God preserves the saints in

their faith, but he preserves through warnings. And we should not fear the warnings of the word of God. We should as believers pay attention to them and our lives should be governed accordingly.

Now another question arises. Does it not say here "Destroy not him with thy food, for whom Christ died."? Does this suggest that Jesus Christ has died with the intent of saving everyone? If that were so then Jesus Christ did not accomplish the will of God, because not all are saved. The deity would be frustrated. There would be a problem in the Godhead. But again this text affords us no problem concerning the doctrine of the extent of the atonement. One of the greatest of the students of this question has said "May not a man be exhorted not to do what he could not do if he tried." Well of course the answer is yes.

Bengel says, "Do not think more of your food than Christ of his life." And that is the main point that Paul wants to make. He wants to make the point that a true Christian will not make more of his food than Christ has made of his life. If Christ has loved someone enough to give himself for them, a fellow believer, then surely we're not going to offend the conscience of our weak brother by doing something that has to do with food which offends his conscience. Can we not love our brother enough to exercise loving consideration toward our weak brother in the light of the fact that Jesus Christ has loved us and loved him enough to die for him? The argument I think is very plain.

When I was going through theological seminary, I had two friends, one from the state of Michigan and one from the state of Washington. I did have one other friend or so, but these two friends were the friends I was speaking about. And one of them was a Christian of some years and the other was relatively new in the faith. My friend of a number of years as a Christian loved coffee. My other friend, I discovered, thought that coffee was wrong. And when they sat down at the table in dining room at the theological seminary, one of my friends drank coffee and the other didn't. And finally one day my friend who had been a Christian for a lengthy period of time said, "Don't you like coffee?" He said, "No, I don't like coffee because I think it's bad for you and therefore, it's wrong."

Well, I noticed thereafter that my other friend never drank coffee in the presence of this other student. And finally I asked him, not knowing a great deal about the Bible in those days. At least I know a little bit more now. He went on to explain to me that he did not want to wound the conscience of his brother if he really thought it was wrong. He thought it was all right, but he said, "If he thinks it's wrong, I don't want to disturb him and upset him by drinking coffee in his presence." Well that was a Christian attitude and it was a case in which he did not wish to put a stumbling block before the brother, because if my other friend had looked at him and said "well, he drinks coffee. I think it's wrong, but it tastes pretty good." I remember the first one of my friends took coffee the first time and he said, "It tastes so good, it must be sinful." But anyway, if he had really liked coffee, that might have been an occasion that posed a problem for him because then he might have violated his conscience, thinking it was wrong, but in the light of his brother's example, he went ahead and drank the coffee. In that case, he would be sinning. Whereas the brother who drank the coffee in freedom would not be, so the apostle says.

H. A. Ironside, in one of his commentaries, tells of a rather interesting experience that he had when he was in Detroit once. He was holding some meetings there, and on Sunday afternoon the Sunday school had a picnic. They went out to a beautiful spot and

they spend the afternoon together and there was a man who was a former Mohammedan from India who was present. He had been converted in this country. His family was still in India. His name, by the way, was Mohamed Ali. Mr. Ali was a Christian man and he was talking with Dr. Ironside at the picnic when a young lady came by with a tray full of sandwiches. And she said, "Would you men like some sandwiches?" And Dr. Ironside was a man who had come rapidly to the front; he had a great big pot like this, and a voice to go with it, a really great Bible teacher, also a great eater evidently. [Laughter] And he said "Yes, I'll have several of them."

And then she turned to Mr. Ali and Mr. Ali said, "What kind are they?" And she said, "Well, there's some fresh pork, and there are some ham sandwiches." Mr. Ali said, "Do you have any beef?" She said "No, I don't." "Do you have any lamb?" "No" "Do you have any fish?" And she said, "No" "Well, thank you, my dear young lady, but I won't take any," and laughingly she said to Mr. Ali, "Well, Mr. Ali, you surprise me. Are you so under law that you cannot eat pork? Don't you know that a Christian is at liberty to eat any kind of meat?" He said, "I am at liberty, my dear young lady, to eat it, but I'm also at liberty to let it alone. You know I was brought up a strict Mohammedan." He said, "My father who's nearly eighty years of age is still a Mohammedan. Every three years I go back to India to give an account of the tea business that we have. Now I'm in charge of things in the United States, but he is still the nominal head of our company. And furthermore, he's a strict Mohammedan and when I get home I know how I will be greeted, because I'm greeted that way every time I come." He said "the friends will be sitting inside the house. My father will come to the door, when the servant announces that I am there. And he will say through the door 'Mohamed, have those infidels taught you to eat the filthy hog meat yet?' And he will say, "No, father. Pork has never passed my lips. And with that," he said, "I will be invited in the house and I will have an opportunity sooner or later to preach Christ to them. And so I do not take any pork for that reason." There is an application of love toward those who are outside the faith as well.

These are the things that the apostle is talking about and he goes on to speak in verse 16 about the influence on the heathen that we have. He says: "Let not then your good be evil spoken of." I think that word "evil spoken of" indicates that the apostle is speaking about the unsaved world. Do not let the gospel, in other words, suffer by your disputes, your contentions, because he goes on to say, "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." In other words, the primary thing in connection with the Christian faith is not what we eat and what we drink, but it is "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." The kingdom of God, this new theocracy of which we are a part, which is now in existence. The Son of God, having offered the sacrifice by which the kingdom has been inaugurated and having ascended to the right hand of the Father, he reigns there over the kingdom of God as the messianic king. That kingdom which is invisible will become visible at his Second Advent when the kingdom of God upon the earth is instituted and we shall have a part in that. But in the meantime, the kingdom of God is characterized by certain principles. And it is not food and drink. In other words, these are morally indifferent things.

A week or two ago I was in Nacogdoches, as you know I mentioned last week. And one of my friends down there is Bobby Murphy, and he's known as the sage of east Texas. He's a humorist with most interesting stories. They're funny, but he's a Christian

man and he's spoken a number of times in the Dallas area. He speaks all over the country. He does practically that entirely now, though he is a lawyer by profession. Well we were sitting in his mother's house, and he came in to visit and he told us a story about a preacher who liked an occasional glass of wine. And so one of the deacons came to him and said, "I'd like to give you a present. And the only provision is that you give me thanks for it in the Sunday Morning service." And with that he took out a bottle of peach wine. Well, it was one of his favorite kinds of wines, so he took the wine and he said he would do it. So Sunday morning the meeting began and they had the doxology and the singing of the Gloria and the other preliminaries. They sang some hymns. No mention was made of the gift. They had some announcements, which he thought surely was the time that the preacher would speak. Nothing was said. The sermon began and still nothing was said. And finally the sermon was concluded. And as the preacher asked everybody to stand for the benediction, he said, "Oh, there is something that I have forgotten." He said, "I'd like to thank Deacon So-and-so for the wonderful gift of fruit which he has given me and for the spirit in which he gave it." [Laughter] Well, it is well for us to remember that "the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Now I would like to suggest to you, that the apostle is not talking about goodness, and he's not talking about peace in the sense of a lack of anxiety and joy in the sense of just happiness, any kind of happiness. But these words righteousness, peace and joy are expressions that he has unfolded in the Epistle to the Romans. The kingdom of God is characterized by justification. That is its fundamental thing. And the apostle in Romans has given us the principles of justification that an individual is justified by faith in Jesus Christ, God having provided the sin offering, the Lord Jesus Christ; by which his righteousness and his justice are satisfied and his love freed to go out to men who are sinners. Justification, the kingdom of God is grounded in the righteousness of faith. If we don't have the righteousness of faith, we are not in the kingdom of God. You sitting in the audience, if you do not have the righteousness that comes by faith, you're not in the kingdom of God. You do not have the forgiveness of sins and you do not have hope.

The peace that he speaks about is the alienation that exists between the man who is an enemy of God and God. And the peace that now obtains is the peace that has been wrought out by the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ who has reconciled us to God by virtue of his cross. And the joy is the joy of this righteousness and peace that he has accomplished and is found in the presence of the Holy Spirit. So, "Let not your good be evil spoken of: the kingdom of God is not food and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he that in these things." Now there is a question of text here and probably we are to read this "For he that in this serves Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men." If "these things" is correct, he is referring to righteousness, peace and joy. If the other is correct, he is talking about the evangelical way, the gospel, the salvation that we have in Christ. He "that in this serves Christ is acceptable to God, and is approved of men." In other words, legalism is displeasing to the Lord.

And finally, there is a concluding exhortation there in verse 19 and 20. He says, "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and the things with which one may edify another. For food destroy not the work of God."

Now, there is a final word here for the strong in the latter part of the chapter. The figure of the edifice is referred to and he talks about what edifies and what does not edify.

And he speaks first of sin arising from examples, as he speaks to the strong. He says, verse 20 and the latter part of the verse, "All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence." Now that statement is capable of two meanings.

Ordinarily reformed men agree in their interpretations and those that are not reformed agree in their interpretations. Here is a case where two reformed men, two men who believe in the sovereign grace of God, have given different interpretations of this statement "it is evil for that man who eateth with offence." One of these men, William G. T. Shedd, has said that this is the sin of the weak who is eating contrary to his convictions. "It's evil for that man who eats with offence." That is a man who thinks that something is wrong, but he goes ahead and eats anyway. He offends his conscience, and therefore it's evil for him to eat if he thinks it's wrong. It's evil for a man to take a drink of wine if he thinks it's wrong to do so.

On the other hand, Charles Hodge, another reformed man, says that this is the sin of the strong who's injuring the conscience of the weak. It's evil for that man who eats with offense to the other brother, that is, providing a stumbling block to him. If I know that my brother thinks that drinking a glass of wine is wrong, I should not drink that wine in his presence because I will offend his conscience, and therefore, give him occasion to judge, cause him to fall into sin. I rather think that's the point, because usually in this passage, the giving of the offense is from the strong to the weak.

Now in Believers Chapel on Sunday nights we observe the Lord's supper. We have the table, and on the table there is the bread and the wine. There are some people who think that putting alcoholic beverage in their mouth is wrong. Whether it is this much, or this much, whatever it may be, it doesn't make any difference, it's wrong. Well, we do have wine on our communion table. But we also have grape juice for those who have consciences opposed to the wine. And that's the reason we do. If you have certain scruples, then of course, you should take the grape juice. You should not take the wine if you think it's wrong. On the other hand, Christian men do have freedom so far as I can tell from the teaching of the word of God. But if we know that this offends someone in the audience, we should not offend their weak conscience.

Now, there are some interesting things about this, and I do want to just make one or two statements and have you think about them, because they are serious matters. At times, it is probably proper for us to indulge in our liberty, because after all, what the Bible teaches is important for us to understand. The cause of Jesus Christ is never advanced by having every strong Christian in a congregation always and completely forego his rights, because what happens then is that the question is settled on the basis of the narrowest and the most prejudiced person in the congregation. The person who is most narrow in his viewpoint and most prejudiced, it is his viewpoint that ultimately prevails. And it would be all right if that was all that was involved, but what eventually becomes involved in this is that the outside world then begins to think that a Christian is a person who, if in order to be a Christian, must give up this and must give up that and must give up the other thing, and the result is that our salvation by grace becomes confused with things that have to do with human works. And thus we give a false picture of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ray Stedman in one of his books has commented on the fact that he once heard of a church that got into an unholy argument over whether they ought to have a Christmas tree at their Christmas programs. Some thought a tree was fine and they understood it in

a Christian sense. Others thought no, Christmas trees are of pagan origin and you should not have any Christmas trees. And so when the time came for the party, one group brought in a Christmas tree. The other group dragged the tree out. Those that brought the Christmas tree dragged it back in. And they got into a little bit of a squabble and finally actually some fist fights broke out at the Christmas party over the Christmas tree. And eventually, so Ray says, the whole thing was in the newspapers because they ended up suing each other in a court of law. And he said, what else could non-Christians conclude but that the gospel consists in whether you have a Christmas tree or not, or whether you believed in Christmas trees. Last night, I told this to Martha and she said, "Christians are marvelous, aren't they?" [Laughter] And she meant it in the sense in which I meant it. We are so funny in our little idiosyncrasies that it's amusing to have fellowship with a company of people, because all of our humanity shows itself sooner or later.

Now Paul, I say, concludes with a word. Again, he spoke about sin arising from examples in verse 21. "It is good neither to eat meat, nor to drink wine, nor anything by which thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak. Hast thou faith? Have it to thyself before God." In other words, you believe that things are pure, I do too. All things are lawful, but all things are not expedient as he says in another place. Have your faith before yourself and before God.

That's an interesting statement because it means if you have this Christian freedom, there are times when you should give it up for the sake of a weak brother who doesn't yet know the full teaching of the freedom that we have in the word of God, but have it before God. And in having it before God, that of course, is designed to inhibit licentiousness, for some Christians do use their freedom in such a way that it almost becomes licentiousness. So if you have freedom, and there's a weak brother, have it but have it before God. Don't parade your freedom, but do it before God, remembering that all that we believe and all that we do are under his eyes.

And finally he concludes by speaking of sin arising from doubt. He says, "Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. (That's the strong.) But he that doubteth is condemned if he eat, because he does not eat of faith: for whatever is not of faith is sin."

There's the nature of sin. It's wrong to do anything we think is wrong, but it's not always right to do what we think is right. "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." What is sin? Sin is unbelief, unbelief that results in rebellion against God which issues in immorality. There are people who think that sin is murder. Yes, sin is murder, thievery, adultery, fornication, etc., all true. But the essence of sin is unbelief, for it is unbelief in the promises of God that lead men to rebel against God and finally to live in immorality.

So, the word to the weak is: Never act from doubt but from conviction. The word for the strong is: Be free, but don't parade your freedom and be free in love. Christians are free to say no, just as much as they are free to say yes. May God help us to act in love toward our fellow believers when the occasion demands it.

If you are here this morning, and you have never believed in Christ, well, you're neither strong nor free according to Paul's language. You're not in the company of the free and the strong, or the weak and the strong. May God in his wonderful grace, point you to the Lord Jesus Christ who offered the atoning sacrifice. May you flee to the cross, lean upon him, become a member of this wonderful company with all of our

particularities that God constantly is sanctifying, forming us ultimately to be like Christ when we all shall know the truth of God and live by it.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these words of instruction that come from the apostle Paul. O God, enable us to grow into mature Christians. We love our freedom that we have in Christ, Lord. Enable us to exercise it before God. And for those of our brethren whose consciences are weak, who have scruples, help us to be understanding and loving and may also they be responsive to the word of God coming to understand all things ...

**[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]**