

Righteousness and Peace and Joy

Romans 14:1-13

It is a terrible thing to encourage another person to do what is wrong.

ESV **Matthew 18:7** "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!

Therefore, as Christians, we should avoid committing any sin, but we should really take care not to lead others to sin. Leading someone to commit sin is maybe the least loving thing that you could ever do to them. Encouraging others to commit sin is final stage in a culture's collapse that we see in Romans 1.

Romans 1:32 ³² Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

But God's standard of love takes this a step further. We should not lead someone to do what he believes to be sin, even if we do not believe it to be sin.

Read Romans 14:13-23.

Let's begin with Paul's final statement:

Romans 14:23 For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

We know from our catechism that sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the Law of God. There is an objective standard. You must not cross this line. When you do, it is rightly called sin. But here Paul gives us a subjective aspect to sin. Sin is not simply transgressing a law, it is also anything that does not proceed from faith.

By "faith" Paul must mean here something more than a reliance upon the finished work of Jesus Christ for our salvation. It is technically true that to not have a reliance on Christ's righteousness as the as the foundation of all our acts of obedience makes them sinful. We are replacing true religion with a human religion of works righteousness. And God is not pleased with or impressed by any attempt to justify ourselves before him by our works. But this is not the way that Paul is using the term

here in Romans 14. He is using the term in the same way that we think of our conscience. Faith, in this sense, is the inner “belief” that some action is right or wrong.

Elwell’s Dictionary of Theology states, “Conscience is an awareness restricted to the moral sphere. It is moral awareness.”

In the OT, they do not use the word “conscience”, but the idea is everywhere. The conscience is often referred to as the “heart”.

2 Samuel 24:10 ¹⁰ But David's heart struck him after he had numbered the people. And David said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O LORD, please take away the iniquity of your servant, for I have done very foolishly."

The NT does use the word conscience taken from the Greek word

sunei,dhsij, ewj, h` (1) as a perceptive *awareness* within oneself, *consciousness* ([HE 10.2](#); [1P 2.19](#)); (2) as the faculty of moral consciousness or awareness by which moral judgments relating to right and wrong are made *conscience* ([AC 23.1](#))

Emmanuel Kant “speaks of it (the conscience) as a consciousness of a court within man’s being...”

The conscience functions in two ways:

1. Before we act: It urges us to do the right thing and restrains us from doing the wrong thing.
2. After we have acted: It affirms us when we do the right thing and condemns us when we do the wrong thing. When we go against our conscience we then experience inner distress, shame, and lack of peace. When we obey our conscience we then experience peace and joy.

So, Paul teaches that to go against your conscience is sin. Luther taught that to do so was not safe. Why? Because the conscience can become seared so that it no longer functions as originally designed. The conscience is seared as we repeatedly make choices that are contrary to its urgings. If you touch a hot stove, your finger will be burned. Your nerves will send emergency messages to your brain telling you to remove your hand. But if you leave your hand there long enough, or if you repeatedly place your finger on the hot

pan, eventually the nerve endings will be damaged. Or your brain will no longer take notice of the warning impulses. The same sort of thing happens to us morally in our conscience when we repeatedly choose to go against our conscience.

In God's mercy, he will sometimes take a seared conscience and reawaken it. This is how people who have lived in sin for some time, are brought back to repentance. But it is never safe to "presume" upon God's mercy. To presume upon mercy is to take for granted that God will act mercifully. It is to take sin lightly believing that at some later point, you will be able to repent and walk with God. God does often bring his wayward children back to himself, but we are not to presume upon this mercy.

This is Paul's beginning point. He does not simply say, "To go against God's Law is sin." That certainly is true. And ideally, our conscience would be aligned with God's Law, such that they function together as one. But due to living in a fallen world, this is rarely, if ever the case.

Our inner moral compass can become twisted such that it no longer reads true north. A person's conscience can become so seared that they feel little, if any, shame and remorse over actions that God's Word clearly define as sin. Older people often look at the younger generation wondering how they can do "without shame" what their generation may have done, but only did "full of shame."

But it is also true that a person's conscience may be hyper-sensitive to sin. In other words, some consciences feel guilt and shame over behaviors that God's Word says should be embraced with thanksgiving.

I believe Jesus has great compassion on these people. Much of his animosity towards the Pharisees was driven by their heaping man-made rules on the people that went beyond God's moral commands. The Pharisees themselves did not always care about the rule except to make themselves look better than they were. But many of their hearers had their consciences "mis-informed" and so were led to feel guilt over behaviors that should have been embraced with thanksgiving.

We should follow Jesus' example. We should continually study God's Word to recalibrate our inner moral compass. We do not want to be insensitive to sin. But neither should we want to be hyper-sensitive such that we feel something to be sin that is not actually sinful.

But in the case of the hyper-sensitive conscience, until our conscience has been recalibrated, we should not commit acts against our conscience. It is destructive to your soul to go against your conscience. This is true even if your conscience is misinformed and is more sensitive than God's Word requires. If you believe in your heart that

something is wrong, it is dangerous and destructive to do that behavior. This is not to say that your feelings are the standard. Certain behaviors are wrong whether or not you feel them to be wrong. But it is possible for a behavior to be technically right, but wrong for you because you believe it to be wrong in your heart. This is difficult and complex, to be sure. But it is the truth.

And when you start peeling back the onion there is another layer. What happens if your conscience correctly believes a particular behavior to be good and acceptable to God, but the conscience of your brother or sister thinks otherwise? What are you to do? How should your love for your brother or sister affect your behavior?

Let's go back to verse 13.

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.

Rather than judging our brother, we are to “decide to never put a stumbling block or hindrance” in his path.

The situation is that two brothers have come to two different conclusions as to the rightness of some specific behavior. They each have an inner moral compass. But the inner moral compass of the one says the behavior is acceptable, while the little voice inside the head of the other says that the behavior is wrong. They cannot both be right. They can both be wrong. But they cannot both be right. And we can strive to recalibrate them both until they both are in agreement not only with each other, but with God's eternal standard. But Paul is a realist. He knows that recalibrating the conscience is slow and imperfect in this life. Sincere Christians will disagree until Jesus returns and sets us all straight. And before this happens, we have an incredible opportunity to love our brother or sister in Christ.

We must limit our use of our freedoms so that we do not lead them to go against their conscience. Paul does not argue for the abandonment of our freedoms. But he does promote the careful and loving exercise of those freedoms.

¹⁴ I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus
that nothing is unclean in itself,

Paul believed his own compass to be correctly calibrated. He was fully persuaded that God did not require a Christian to consider any food as “unclean” in itself. Whether

through his study of the Word, or his meditation upon the teachings of Jesus, or through some special revelation, Paul was convinced that he had the freedom to eat meats.

But there were others in the church, for one reason or another, were not yet convinced. And so, for those who believed meats were unclean, meats were unclean.

but

it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

Therefore, if you lead them to do what they believe to be wrong, you are leading them into sin.

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.

A behavior that may be fine for you to do in isolation, becomes wrong as you live in community. Paul says that you are “destroying the one for whom Christ died.” How are you destroying them? You are encouraging them to go against their conscience. And when he goes against his conscience, he is grieved in his soul. His conscience condemns him, and he begins to lose peace and joy. And peace and joy are those virtues of the Kingdom of God that are given to us to experience now.

As Christians, we belong to the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom will be a kingdom of righteousness. And it will be a kingdom that is full of peace and joy. Because we belong to that kingdom even now, we have the privilege of experiencing peace and joy. But when we choose to go against our conscience, we are robbed of present peace and joy.

This is a good place to remind you of the gospel. You do not have peace and joy because you perfectly submit your heart to Christ. Nor do you have peace and joy because you have a conscience that is perfectly in line with God’s Word. You have peace and joy because Jesus Christ has shed his blood for you. He has paid in his own flesh the penalty for your sin. You have peace with God because you have been declared righteous by Jesus Christ. Let us not begin with Christ and then think that we finish in our own righteousness...

But while we must be careful with the exercise of our own freedoms, we must not go so far as to let those with hyper-sensitive consciences take away our freedoms.

16 So do not let what you regard as good
 be spoken of as evil.

Just as it is not right to ignore your brother's conscience, it is also not right to be dictated by that conscience. There is a place to stand your ground and to live in the freedom that is yours in Christ. Alcohol is a good example for us. I am convinced that while drunkenness is absolutely forbidden in Scripture, the drinking of alcohol in moderation is not forbidden. But some of my best friends, true men of God, do not partake of alcohol. I applaud and support their personal conviction. I will even choose to not partake of alcohol when I am with them.

But the Word of God does not condemn all use of alcohol. Jesus himself turned the water to wine. There are several passages of Scripture that describe the Kingdom of God as a place where new wine abounds. The drinking of some alcohol is associated with joy of the eternal kingdom.

Therefore, when I teach, I try to help people to not think of alcohol as only evil all the time. To do so prevents you from understanding much of the symbolism in Scripture describing the joys of eternity.

But, the freedom to partake of alcohol in moderation is not essential to Christianity. We cannot make the case that those who choose to not drink alcohol are somehow being robbed of some element of peace and joy.

17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter
 of eating and drinking
 but
 of righteousness and peace and joy
 in the Holy Spirit.

To give up in certain situations the drinking of alcohol is not a robbing you of the kingdom of God. We can still enjoy righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit without alcohol. There are some activities that we cannot do without. Worship being the first on the list. Tell me that I cannot gather together for worship, and I have a problem.

We all have convictions. And based upon those convictions we are bowing our hearts to God. The idea of keeping our convictions to ourselves does not mean that we cannot have hearty discussions or even debates with other believers. It simply means that we must recognize that each of us stands before God giving account of our own lives and not the lives of our brothers next to us.

We are to be building up our brothers and sisters and not tearing them down. We have almost come to the end of our passage. But there is one other important issue that I believe robs many of us of much peace and joy.

Blessed is the one
who has no reason to pass judgment on himself
for what he approves.

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.

I want to talk about one phrase here: whoever has doubts is condemned. The traditional understanding of this statement is that if you have any doubts in your mind as to whether a behavior is right you should always err on the side of caution. And while I think that there may be some wisdom in this perspective, I am not certain that it is what Paul intended.

The Greek word for doubt is *diakrinomenos*. And while it can have the meaning of doubting or uncertainty, more often than not, it has the meaning of making a clear distinction between two things. It is what you do when you make a judgment call between two options.

and he who is making a difference, if he may eat, hath been condemned,
(YLT)

but he who makes a distinction, if he may eat, is condemned, (Mike's Translation)

As we go throughout life, we are constantly being called to make choices. And we often have some degree of uncertainty in our hearts as to the rightness of our choices. If you are condemned every time you make a choice while your heart has some degree of

doubt, you will go through life with very little peace and joy. What is more, if we take Paul to mean “doubt” then only those who have no self-doubt, can obey God. I think this has it wrong. Self-doubt is not a bad thing. It is actually a very humble thing to second guess yourself. And it is the foundation of improvement to have self-reflection after making a decision.

No, I do not think Paul is telling us to only make choices if we are absolutely convinced that our choice is the right one. Rather, I think it is better to understand this verse to mean that if you are strongly convinced something is wrong, then listen to your conscience. Don't be swayed simply by the behaviors of those around you. Don't go along with the crowd, when your moral compass is saying, “No!”

You may change your views at some later time, but until you do, obey your conscience. But don't be burdened by indecision because you think that any choice that includes some degree of doubt is somehow sinful.

Bow your heart to God. Sincerely offer yourself to him as a living sacrifice. And then make the best decision you can with the wisdom that God has given to you. God does not require more.

Brothers and sisters, the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking. The Kingdom of God is one of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

May we throughout our lives be striving to recalibrate our moral compass according to the Word of God.

May we strive to submit ourselves to the moral compass that we have.

May we encourage others to submit themselves to their consciences.

May we not sacrifice peace and joy because we do not have absolute certainty in our decision.

And may we build one another up, rather than tearing them down.

In so doing, we will be serving our Lord Jesus Christ.

And he will be pleased with us, his children, those for whom he died.