

Sin is Lack of Faith

Romans 14:23a

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

I know you think this is a big day because it is Memorial Day. But it's really a big day because we're ending a chapter in Romans, which has only occurred 14 times in the last 21 years. So it's really memorable. Loved ones, it's Romans 14, if you'd like to look at it. I won't point you to the last verse yet but just remind you of the subject of this chapter 14 that we started quite a while ago. It's in Romans 14:2 and it'll help all of us to start the study at the same spot.

Romans 14:2, "One believes he may eat anything, while the weak man eats only vegetables." That's the subject. One man believes he can eat anything while another believes he can eat only vegetables. In other words, there are some things that are just wrong. We all know they're wrong.

The Bible says plainly, you shouldn't murder, you shouldn't steal, you shouldn't kill, you shouldn't commit fornication, those are plainly wrong and there's no problem about those. But there are other things like, should all Christians be vegetarians? Or, should you be able to eat meat, or should Christians drink any alcohol? Or, how should you observe the Sabbath? Those questions are questions upon which many Christians honestly differ. They just do differ. That's the subject of this chapter, loved ones.

Paul is writing about the questions that Christians honestly differ about. That is, things that aren't plainly right or plainly wrong but many of us who honestly do love Jesus and honestly respect his word, say in good conscience, "I don't see that God's word tells me I should eat meat, or that I shouldn't eat meat. I don't honestly see that God's word plainly tells me I shouldn't drink wine or that I should drink wine. I don't honestly see that God's word plainly tells me I shouldn't buy anything on a Sunday or that I should buy something on a Sunday."

Those questions -- and indeed many of us might extend it to other questions that are popular today among Christians -- are called at times, "adiaphora." It's a Greek word that means, things upon which people honestly differ and differ in good conscience. Now Paul gives us guidance about what our attitude should be and it's in verse 3 of Romans 14, if you look at it.

Romans 14:3, "Let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats; for God has welcomed him." Through Paul God says, "Look, don't you look down on somebody else as being legalistic just because you feel you're free to do the thing. Don't look down on them and accuse them of being legalistic." Because really the whole purpose of our lives is not to judge each other and decide, "This man's right", or, "This man's wrong." The purpose of our lives is to draw each other into a place where we do what God is guiding us to do.

So that's the whole purpose of your life and mine. It's to bring everybody into conformity to God's own character, by getting them to do what he is telling them to do through their consciences. Loved ones, that's it really. If you would live by your conscience, God's Spirit witnesses with your spirit that you're his child. If you would let your conscience dictate what your will does in your life, then God himself would witness his personal pleasure in approval of you.

If you would practice what you preach, if you would make your faith and your life the same. If you

would make your actions match your creed, God's Holy Spirit would begin to witness in your life that he's real and alive. That's what Paul says throughout this chapter. He says, "So the big deal isn't, do you do what everybody else does? The big responsibility we have in this life is to encourage each other to live according to our consciences and to do what our consciences tell us."

Now there are two responses that we can take to that this morning. Some of us can say, "Great, I just live by the old inner voice. Okay, I am a cannibal. I can eat people." Or we say, "My conscience hasn't told me that this is wrong. So then you're saying I can do it." Well it is important to see that Paul is speaking to believers. That is, he is speaking to people who believe that this dear Book is God's word and he is saying within the framework of this Book and the things that this Book says are plainly right or plainly wrong, you need them to make your life match your conscience. You need to live by your conscience. But you do need to do it within the framework of this Book.

It's not just, in other words, any old inner voice that you have, but it's your conscience informed by this plain, revealed word of God. Now others of us have a tendency to say, "Well, okay, you're saying in here then there's a fair bit of latitude for us, Christians. I mean we should see what's in that book and we should live by it and just keep our eyes open in case we're discouraging somebody else by our behaviour."

Now loved ones, maybe it's good to see that both of those responses have one thing in common. The response of the person who says, "Great, I am a cannibal, I can eat people." Or, the response of the Christian who says, "Oh good, so I can obey God's word and just keep an eye out to see whether I am harming anybody by my example or not." Both of those attitudes have the same desire to preserve some little area of our lives where our activity and our behavior can be arbitrary. Do you see that?

It's the same sneaking little attitude underneath. It's kind of a feeling, "Oh good, okay, I have to obey there, there, there and there, but I see I have this little area of my life where I can preserve my own autonomy and I can make my judgments on the basis of what I think is right or wrong."

Now loved ones, the truth is, our dear God doesn't let one neutron, and a neutron is pretty small he doesn't let one neutron go anywhere just because it wants to go. Our dear Father is the God of the whole universe. He doesn't throw the thing together and say, "Sort it out yourselves." He runs every planet in a precise orbit. He watches over every daffodil and every rose.

You may look at a daffodil and you may see the cascade of flowers on a hillside in spring time and think, "What gay chance and abandon there is there." No, it is a beautifully ordered plan and design, gaiety and beauty that God has created there. It just looks beautiful and looks refreshing to us because God has planned it carefully. There is nothing in this universe that God leaves to its own chance or its own will. He has a will for every little thought and action in your life and mine. He really has.

You aren't just a blotch of humanity in the universe here that he says, "Sort it out yourself. Do what you like yourself as long as more or less you're heading in my direction." No, the Father made you carefully and planned you with great care and he has a will for every second of your life. He has a perfect will for you. Of course, some of us believe that, and then we fall into the other pattern. We fall into legalism and we start trying to make rules and laws for every possible eventuality. So, where the Bible is not explicit about something, we fall into legalism and we start

making rules and regulations so that we'll all do the right thing.

Loved ones, the Father has a far more beautiful way for us, a far more personal way, a far freer way, a far more liberated way. It's the way he gives to us through Paul in Romans 14 and the very last verse 23.

Romans 14:23a, "But he who has doubts is condemned, if he eats, because he does not act from faith." He is saying, you're a Jew who was converted. You're a Jewish Christian and you really do believe that it's wrong to eat pork. And after you've met Jesus, you still think it's wrong to eat pork. But an older Christian who was also a Jew, has come to the place in his relationship with Jesus where he doesn't think it's wrong to eat pork. You meet him and you talk the thing over and you leave and you really aren't persuaded in your own conscience that it's now right to eat pork. But you look at him and you say to yourself, "Well, he is older than me. He is more mature. He probably has come into what I'll come into. So okay, I'll eat pork."

Paul says, God's Spirit will witness condemnation in your conscience and will bring the consequences of distance and separation from God because you have acted according to another man's conscience and not according to your own. That's it. That's what the Father is saying to us. In things that are not clearly spelled out in this dear Book, it's vital that you act according to your own conscience and according to the light that God's Spirit has given you.

Brothers and sisters, I plead that with every one of you, even those of you who have trouble at this present time with some of the things in this Book. I frankly think if you have trouble with it, you're in grave danger but God loves you so much that he wants you to act according to that inner voice of conscience yourself. If you act and have doubts inside yourself about the way you're acting, then unquestionably, God's Spirit will witness condemnation to you and will witness a sense of distance from God and a lack of his presence in your life. That's true.

It's the same you see with drinking wine. You see it in Romans 14:21. It's maybe important because of the strength of many of our convictions on alcoholism, it's important to see that Paul does put it in this same category of "adiaphora", something that people honestly differ about.

Romans 14:21, "It is right not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother stumble." In other words, he says maybe you're a more mature Christian and to you, it's no big deal drinking wine. You don't see it as a sin at all but there's some other younger Christian who thinks that Christians should never drink alcohol, and he has great respect for you and the Holy Spirit witnesses to you that you'll lead him into sinning against his own conscience if you drink wine.

Then Paul is saying, it's important for you to forego what really you feel you have a right to do. It's important to be willing to forego it, because you're here to bring him into conformity to Jesus' image and to bring him into an obedience to his own conscience. So that's tantamount in your life, even if it means you giving up something that you personally feel you have a right to do. But the same is true in regard to drinking wine.

If you're what Paul calls maybe a weaker brother or maybe you're a younger brother or sister, and you feel, "No, wine is definitely wrong. We ought to abstain from it even if just as a testimony against the alcoholism that is in our society." So you meet somebody who is older and they happen to say to you that they're having a glass of wine with their dinner and you feel in your conscience that you shouldn't drink, but you've great respect for this person so you think, "Well, I'll take

it. It won't do me any harm."

Loved ones, it'll do you harm not because of the alcohol and not even because of following his example. It'll do you harm because you still have doubts in your conscience about it and he who has doubts and still eats, will be condemned and the Holy Spirit will witness condemnation to your own heart on that issue. You may wonder, "Why do I feel such a sense of loneliness or separation from God?" It's because of that. You're sinning against your own conscience.

Now you may say, "Well, why make such a big deal about this?" Because it is the Father's glorious plan that you and I would be able to live in the sunshine and the light of his approval on our lives. That's it. The common message of today is, "Oh you can't ever live according to what God wants you to live." But you can! It is God's great desire and plan for us in Jesus' death on Calvary that we should be able to live in the full sunshine of his love and his approval on our lives.

That's why Paul makes such a big deal about it. He says, "Look, it's possible for you to know that God approves of you night and day. It's possible for you to know the presence of God's Spirit in your life every moment of your life. It's possible for you to know for certain that if you died any moment, you'd go straight to heaven. It's possible for you to know that you're delighting and pleasing God every second of your life but only if you live according to your conscience. If you live tightly according to what your conscience guides you to do."

Now loved ones, does that apply to the stronger, more mature Christian also? Yes, it does. If you stop drinking wine or you stop eating meat or you stop something else, just because of Christian peer pressure, or just because lots of other people are saying to you, "You know you're spoiling your witness if you do that." Then you yield to that because of the other person's opinion or because of the pressure of the group around you. Yes, God's Spirit will witness condemnation to you. You must act according to your own conscience, you must.

It doesn't matter if the whole world condemns you. It doesn't matter if the world laughs at you, you act according to the inner voice of your conscience and wherever you sin against that, God's Spirit witnesses condemnation to you and the truth is that if you respect your conscience and you move according to it, God will witness his approval on your life.

What if you're not sure? Well, the verse speaks very plainly to us, "If anybody has doubts and yet eats, he'll be condemned." That's it. If you have doubts about something, don't do it. If you have doubt, cut it out. It's just plain as that. If you have doubts about anything that you're doing in your life, stop it. Just stop it now. Or if you have a conscience about something and you feel you should do something, then do it.

A relationship with God is not a matter of creating mystical emotional experiences of his presence through using your imagination and meditation and contemplation. True religion and undefiled is acting according to your conscience and allowing God's Spirit to witness his favor and approval on your life.

You know, if you say to me, "Would you back me on this even in stuff that you disagree on?" Yes, you have a special relationship with your God that I don't have. You have a special relationship with your Creator that nobody else has. He has a special plan and will for your life that he hasn't for anybody else's life. Yes, it's vital loved ones. It's vital for you to act according to your conscience and to act with a clear conscience and wherever you have doubts about anything, then hold

everything until you get clarity on that issue.

Now, I'll probably stop dead there and ask any questions or comments. Anybody have any questions or comments?

Q: What if in a family two consciences are working in a different way?

A: It seems that where it concerns especially the influencing of other lives, then I can speak as an old school teacher rather than as a parent. In school, we always felt in the faculty, you had to stick together. If you didn't stick together, well, the trumpet gave forth uncertain sound and the children prepared for battle in a real way. So, in that situation, we always sensed simply a professional respect for each other in regard to the way we were influencing the children. It seems to me sis that it's the same in family life as far as the influencing of younger lives are concerned. You do have to decide, "All right, which voice do you go with?" Normally the pattern is that the father is responsible for being the head of the home, as long as presumably his conscience is guided by God's word. So that's I think probably what I would feel there. My mom and dad were not always together on things and we miserable little creatures were delighted, my brother and I, to take advantage of the obvious debate that was being carried on and it does seem just very important in that case to have unity.

If you push me and said in regard to a situation like a church community, I would think the same is true in regard to elders guiding together. I would just feel a strong responsibility to get alongside Craig or alongside Tim or Rick and talk personally to them and encourage them at the same time to act according to their conscience. But it seems to me in the general guidance of a community it is important that both be together. Does that answer?

Q: <Inaudible>

A: Yes, it's difficult where both are interpreting the word and you kind of both feel you're right. I think that is true. I would say this that if there is honest disagreement, if there is real honest difference in interpretation, the Father certainly does not leave us to the mercy of our own understanding. He will overrule and will guard and will compensate if we will each act up to the best of our conscience. I think that is indicated by many situations where people have actually gone on doing things that many of us would disapprove of and yet they acted up to their conscience, and so God led them on from there.

Q: If you have an urge in your conscience to do something good and yet there seem to be obstacles and difficulties, is that an indication that you shouldn't do it?

A: She is saying if you have an urge in your conscience to do something good and yet there seem to be obstacles and difficulties all the way, is that an indication that maybe you're like Moses kind of acting according to your own lights and your own intentions. It really is interesting that I found that as you go on with Jesus, there can be many obstacles in the way because God seems able more and more to get his will very clearly into your heart. Whereas in the early days you were such a weak little thing that he needed to give you all the help he could. So I am reluctant to say that just because you hit a number of obstacles, such as Martin Luther must have hit as he was imprisoned in this castle and that castle, it doesn't necessarily mean that that is not the Father's will for you. It is true that when God gets his way in your life, there ought to be some flow. There ought to be some sense of flow but it seems to me that it's God giving you guidance through intuition of your

spirit. Then you step out on that and he gives you a little beckoning circumstance to say, "Good, that's right." Then maybe you hit a couple of rocks that almost sink you and yet God gives you still a sense that's the right way to go. Then he gives another little beckoning circumstance.

So it seems you ought not to ignore external confirmation but they ought to be very subordinate to the guidance of your conscience and your intuition. So on the whole, I would say, you can expect some rocks but there ought to be some sense of flow.

Q: How much effect does environment have in your conscience because some people are so free and other people are doubting?

A: Yeah, that's right. Well, you said doubting but it seems to me that it's something we need to realize, loved ones. The society is pretty wild, you know, it is really pretty wild and has surprisingly few axioms that it accepts beyond all doubt and that, we need to remember, is the environment in which we're brought up. So undoubtedly environment does influence your conscience. That's why I think I push this. That's why I said that Paul was giving this advice inside the framework of this dear Book. It seems to me that we need to move within the environment of this Book and then trust God's Spirit to help us to interpret that in the right way.

If I could say too, we're all very different here this morning. I don't know if you know it, but I know it. We're all very different here in this room this morning. I would encourage your dear hearts from wherever you're coming and from however far out you're coming, keep going for God's voice in your dear conscience. And if you keep acting up to that conscience speaking to you, if you stay with this dear Word and keep looking at it, and keep just patiently coming and trying to understand it, and asking God to show you if there's anything that's blinding you, if you will do that, the Father will lead you home. He'll lead you home and I'll encourage you to do that rather than doing what all the Christians do or doing what all the non-Christians do. I don't think the Father leads us that way. He leads us through a personal honesty within our conscience and you know, he'll bring us pretty far.

When you think of the dear lady caught in adultery, he is prepared to go out pretty far to bring us in. If we will walk according to that dear light of conscience, in all honesty, the Father will bring you home in his own way and in a way that will be right for you. So I'd encourage you dear ones, that dear voice within, don't act against it and don't operate on doubt, operate in certainty.

Okay, shall we pray loved ones?

Dear Father, we thank you for making us family and we thank you Lord for comfort with each other and just a sense of being comfortable with you and being at home together in your presence. Lord, we would be real with you about our conscience. Father, we would be careful not to act in doubt but if you have put any doubt within us about any activity or any habit or any way of life or any behavior in which we're involved, Father, until we get certainty on it, we're going to back off. We're just going to stop. We're not clear whether it's right or wrong, but we have doubts about it. So we're just going to stop it now and then we're going to ask you to begin to give us light and show us how we should go, and Father, we would thank you for conscience and we would thank you for being so personal with us. We would thank you Father that there's a place in your heart for each one of us that is made only for us and nobody else can fill it. And you will lead us to that place through the compass that you've put within us, your Holy Spirit, speaking through our conscience.

So Father, we commit ourselves to making our will correspond with our conscience during the rest of this life that you've given us and we trust you to give us the witness of your Holy Spirit that we are approved by you.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and ever more. Amen.