

SCRIPTURE STUDY OF ROMANS 14:13-23

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The passage of Scripture which we will consider in this paper is not an end in itself but is part of a larger unit which begins with 14:1 and continues through 15:13. The theme of this unit is "The weak and the strong Christian." The strong Christian, according to 14:2, was one whose faith allowed him to eat all varieties of meat. This type of Christian ate with the permission which we have received from God in Genesis 9:3, "Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything." This strong Christian probably knew that there had been a period under the old covenant when God had prohibited the eating of certain varieties of meat which He proscribed as ceremonially and dietetically unclean for the nation of Israel, but he also realized that that old ceremonial shadow had passed away with the coming of Christ the Lord. God had made that quite clear in Acts 10 when He sent that large bed sheet from heaven filled with all those living breathing potential gourmet meat entrees which would have been forbidden under the ceremonial law and then told Peter, a man who had been born and raised under that ceremonial law, "Kill and eat." The very thought of it caused Peter to react with a feeling of spiritual heartburn and he protested to the voice from heaven, "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." That heavenly voice then updated Peter's conscience and welcomed him into the New Testament era with the exhortation, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." God had once again reaffirmed the permission he had given to Noah in Genesis 9:3. It's rather interesting to notice in Acts 10 that no mention is made of Peter ever killing and eating any of those strange birds or reptiles in that bed sheet from on high. It may be that he felt like that Jew Prof. J. P. Meyer used to tell us about. The man took instructions and was confirmed in a German Lutheran Church. On the day of his confirmation one of the farmers in the congregation invited him home for dinner and offered him some blood sausage. The Jew elected to forgo the experience explaining that although his heart was converted, his stomach wasn't. Whether Peter's stomach was ever able to make the transition to full Christian liberty God only knows, but God does tell us that His heart made the transition and in Acts 15, at the apostolic conference in Jerusalem, he took a strong stand for Christian liberty. This stand was strong because it rested on God's Word and command. 25 years later Christians in Rome, whose stomachs as well as their hearts were able to handle Christian liberty, were able to eat everything (14:2). In 15:2, Paul refers to such Christians as strong. They were strong because their stand and convictions rested on God's Word.

In 14:2, Paul also referred to Christians who were weak. and cited as a symptom of their weakness the fact that they ate only vegetables. Not eating meat in itself was not necessarily a weakness for in 14:6, Paul says that you can abstain from meat to the glory of God, and it may well have been that they originally decided to give up meat for some God pleasing reason. Since this chapter doesn't mention specific kinds of meat (e.g. pork) but meat in general, I have always assumed that this was not a matter of Old Testament ceremonial scruples as with the Galatians. Since this does not make any mention of this meat having been offered to idols, as was the case in Corinth, the question here seems to have simply been a question of the merits or demerits of meat as a suitable food for Christians. Those "weak" Christians who chose not to eat meat (which according to 14:6 could have been done to the glory of God) may have been reacting against Roman excesses of that time when we know that it was the custom to gorge yourself on the first course at a banquet and then make room for the second course by sliding a feather down your throat. It may be that in reaction to such offensive heathen excesses some Christians had decided that they would glorify their Savior by partaking of a very simple diet even as Daniel and his godly fellows chose to do in the cafeteria at the University of Babylon (Dan., ch. 1). In what way, then, could this godly decision be called weak? It could be called weak only if they began to insist that it was a holier form of conduct than eating meat. It was weak only if they insisted that others should be bound by their free will

decision. It would be weak in that it rested upon their own decision whereas the eating of meat rested upon a clear word and permission of God.

What Paul discussed in some detail regarding meat he then went on to say pertains in a similar way to days (14:6). Some regard all days the same. Others say certain days belong to the Lord. *I suppose* we could say that the person, who understands that in the New Testament all days are alike and that all our days are gracious gifts from the God of our salvation, could be called a strong Christian for this conviction surely rests on Scripture. On the other hand, it certainly can be a very fine and God pleasing fruit of faith to take certain days and dedicate them to the Lord as fast days or holidays. But if that person then feels that his holidays make him a better Christian than the one who regards all days alike or if he insists that others must follow his church calendar, he becomes a weak Christian in that he's taken a stand on his personal decision rather than on God's Word. It's just as wrong and dangerous to stand to the right of God's Word as it is to stand to the left of it. The devil can work on the right (legalistic) side of God's Word just as well as on the left (permissive) rule of it. In fact, when he began to tempt Eve he was standing on the right side. He was even more conservative than God and suggested that all the trees of the garden were off-limits.

Paul finally told the Romans that those who abstained from meat should not judge (14:10) their brothers in Christ who chose to enjoy that nutritious gift of God. On the other hand, those who correctly understood their Christian liberty and chose to eat meat should not look down on those who chose to express their faith in Christ by freely setting aside things which God had not forbidden or by freely observing holidays God had not expressly commanded. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind (14:5) that he was living and dying to the Lord.

With that review and reorientation, then, let's continue with our study of Romans Chapter 14.

Verse 13

mhketi ouh aDi hl ouj krihwmen: aDi a_toueto krihate ma-l on, to'mh'tiqehai proskomma twt-
aDeI fw|h)skahdal on.

No longer, therefore, let us judge one another, but rather judge this, that you put no stumbling block or death trap before your brother. (Literal translation)

The fact that the verse begins with the word, "no longer," suggests that this was not something that could begin to happen but was already going on. They were judging one another – "He's a pietist who doesn't eat meat." "He's a glutton with no self control and won't give up meat for Jesus." "He's a fanatic about all his church holidays." "He hates God and doesn't have a Maundy Thursday service.

Instead of judging one another each one should judge himself. Am I doing something which could cause my brother to stumble in his faith? If I flaunt my Christian liberty before a weak Christian I can cause him to stumble in his faith by acting in an unchristian manner toward me; sitting in judgment of me as someone who has no regard for right or wrong. If I become too ostentatious in my self-chosen acts of self-denial (making a big point of the fact that I don't eat meat or drink wine (v. 21), or that I fast, or whatever) or if I celebrate all my favorite church holidays like that Pharisee in the parable and give the impression that I thank God that I'm not like all those weak Christians who don't make it to church for every Lenten and Advent service, I may cause my brother in Christ to stumble in his faith by doing the unchristian thing of resenting me as such a holier than thou person. When we resent one another we're acting judgmentally and lovelessly and are stumbling in our faith. Let's guard against doing anything to tempt a brother to resent us.

But we can put something worse than a stumbling block before a fellow Christian. We can put a *skandalon*, a death trap, before him. A death trap would either spring a noose around the neck of an unsuspecting victim or run a sharp stick through him, either of which could be fatal. By disregarding a weak Christian's weak conscience scruples you could drive him away from your church and destroy his faith, which would be spiritually fatal, or you could bully him into doing something he thought was wrong, and, even

though it wasn't, in his mind he'd be sinning against God (14:22) and that could be the beginning of confusion and despair which would eventually destroy his faith completely. On the other hand, if you give a fellow Christian the impression that something's wrong even though God hasn't forbidden it (e.g., eating meat) then you may be giving him a picture of God which is stricter than He really is and like Eve (when Satan pictured God to her as a legalist who wouldn't let her eat of any of His trees) he may begin to resent God and ultimately lose his faith because of your spiritual death trap.

Note also in this verse, even though your fellow Christian may be weaker in his faith than you are, he's still your brother, your brother in Christ and you should have a fraternal concern for his faith rather than a cold indifference toward it.

Verse 14

οἷτα καὶ περὶ αἰσμάτων ἐκ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ ἐβίβη οὐδὲν κοινὸν δι' αὐτοῦ· εἰ ἄνθρωπος ὀγίζωμεν ἢ τι κοινὸν εἶηαι, ἐκ αὐτοῦ κοινὸν.

For I know and in Christ Jesus I have been persuaded that nothing is unclean of itself, except to him who considers it unclean to him it is unclean. (Literal translation)

Nothing is unclean in itself. "Nothing" here obviously refers to what Paul has been talking about this entire chapter: "nothing in the way of food," specifically meat. Already in the next verse Paul again mentions meat. To make "nothing" a generic term to cover everything under the sun (including pornographic art etc.) would be doing violence to the context of this passage, rejecting the aprons God Himself designed for Adam and Eve, and contradicting every other passage on the subject of lust.

Nothing in the line of food (meat specifically) is unclear in itself. Of this Paul was fully convinced. This, of course, was a conviction which he had from God and not a conclusion he had drawn on his own or had gotten from other men. It was also an issue which had been thoroughly debated and settled at the apostolic conference in Jerusalem between his first and second missionary journeys.

As Paul spoke these words of conviction he was "in Christ Jesus." He was wrapped in Christ's righteousness and also in the Christian liberty Christ had won for him. He knew that God didn't forbid him to eat any kind of meat. I don't know if his stomach would have allowed him to kill and eat that snake on the Island of Malta, but his conscience would have allowed him to. But on the other hand, Paul knew that not all Christians, especially not all those in Rome, had the same full knowledge of Christian liberty which he had. For many of them, eating meat (any kind of meat) would have been eating what they considered to be unclean and to them it would have been unclean. Many people tell me that they just love split pea soup, that it's absolutely delicious and maybe it is, but my stomach doesn't think so. If I try putting split pea soup into it, I'm going to upset my stomach something awful even though all the great chefs of Europe would stand around me shouting, "It's delicious." Many of those Roman Christians had concluded in their consciences that meat was unclean for a Christian and even though that was not true, eating meat would have been spiritually upsetting to their consciences.

Verse 15

ei qak dia brwma o qel foj sou lupei tai, ouk eti kata agaphn peripateij. mh tw brwmati / sou eknon apol ue, nek ou xristoj apetanen.

But if your brother is distressed on account of (your) food, you are no longer continuing to progress in love. Do not with your food totally destroy one for whom Christ died. (Literal translation)

If your brother has conscience scruples about certain foods (even if those conscience scruples do not come from commands or prohibitions of God) you can upset him by what you eat, because in his mind what you're doing is wrong. His feeling of distress is either that you, his brother in Christ, is doing something wrong or that if you can do it why can't he, and he's being tempted by your eating to do something which in his mind is wrong and, therefore, would be wrong for him.

Note: In this verse Paul uses the word *broma* (food in general) rather than the word *krea* (flesh, what we would call meat) as he does in verse 21. Paul by the word *broma* would seem to be suggesting that not only a callous attitude towards your brothers' feeling about meat but any concerns he has about any food (as in verse 21, even drink) would be covered by this passage.

If you don't care how a brother feels about what you eat (or drink) Paul says you are no longer progressing in love. The word *peripateis* means to make progress. You showed love for that person when you first shared the Gospel with him. You progressed in that love when you regarded him as a brother in Christ. But now that progress in love has come to a screeching halt because you're not concerned about distressing and confusing him by what you eat or drink. The brother is weak in his dietary scruples but you've become weak in Christian love. (It isn't always clear in these cases who's really the weak and who's the strong. Maybe the best way to approach this subject is to realize that we're all weak in one way or another and that we should always be acting out of concern for our brother's weaknesses just as we hope he'll always act out of love and concern for ours.)

But let's just take a case, as the one in our text, where one Christian has strong convictions about his right to eat certain foods and the other Christian is weak and bound by needless conscience scruples which forbid him to eat that food. Both are brothers in Christ. Christ suffered and died for both of them. For both of them, Christ won forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. For both of them Christ won freedom from all Old Testament ceremonial laws and the gifts of New Testament Christian liberty. If we were going to rate those gifts as to their eternal importance we would certainly have to rate salvation over Christian liberty. You can be saved without Christian liberty. All believers in the Old Testament were. But you can't be saved without Christ. So, Paul tells, us we should always exercise our Christian liberty out of love and concern for another person's salvation. Better that I forgo all my Christian liberty, which I don't really need for my salvation anyway, than that I cause it to become a stumbling block or a death trap to another person and thereby destroy him eternally. All things may be lawful for me but all things are not expedient and certainly cannot be done in love if I have any reason at all to believe I might be endangering another person's faith and salvation by doing it. The love of Christ which moved Him to set aside the full enjoyment of His divine glory and suffer death on the cross for both of us should certainly fill my heart and make me ready to set aside the full use of my Christian liberty and sacrifice something which I might enjoy so that my brother might not stumble or be destroyed spiritually and eternally - otherwise how can I say that the love of Christ dwells in me?

Verse 16

mh\bl asfhmeisqw ouh u~~wn~~ to\aq~~o~~h.

Don't let your good be evil spoken of. (Literal translation)

The question here is, what did Paul mean by, "your good?" Since he doesn't parenthetically give a definition for us, we'll have to assume that it means all the good which we have received from God through Christ: salvation and Christian liberty. Meat is a wonderful gift which we have received from God, but by disregarding the feelings of the weak brother, the one who could eat and enjoy meat would be tempting the weak brother all the more to call all this good gift of God unclean, impure and sinful. It could also draw the attention of the whole community to their fight over meat, they would be thought of as that sect that's fighting over meat instead of that church which preaches salvation through Christ. Meat, a wonderful gift of God could become the object of a lot of mockery and ridicule, and even the glory of the Gospel itself would suffer.

Verse 17

ou~~g~~ak e~~st~~in h~~o~~ basil eia tou~~-~~qeu~~-~~brwsij kai~~po~~sij , a~~o~~l a~~-~~dikaiousuhh kai~~ei~~ch~~h~~h kai~~x~~ara~~e~~
pneumati a~~g~~i~~w~~ }

For the Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.
(Literal translation)

In the Greek language this verse begins with the word NOT. If weak Christians kept insisting on their conscience scruples about eating and drinking and strong Christians lovelessly disregarded those scruples and tempted the weak to make even more of an issue of questions about food and drink, soon those Christians themselves would begin to think that their questions were the very essence of the Kingdom of God and that opinion would spread throughout the community and the world - "What is Christianity? I don't know, I guess it has something to do with what you can eat or drink and what you can't?" "Not that at all," is the way Paul begins this verse.

Then in a positive way Paul lists those things which should stand front and center in the minds of Christians and which should dominate the picture of the Kingdom of God which Christians should show to their community and to the world. The Kingdom of God is not meat and drink but righteousness, the righteousness Christ our Savior won for us. This is the only righteousness which avails before God. Meat and drink have nothing to do with this righteousness. The Kingdom of God is also peace, the peace between us sinners and our God which Christ our Savior won for us through His suffering death and resurrection. Squabbling over meat and drink should not draw attention away from that peace or disrupt the peace which should exist among those who are brothers in Christ. The Kingdom of God is also joy, the joy of salvation. The joy of eating a Big Mac dare never become so important to us that it would grieve and destroy this joy for some weak brother who had some personal scruples about eating meat. By the same token, there's also a warning here to the weak brother that he doesn't make his personal conscience scruples about meat such a big issue that it draws attention away from the joy of salvation.

The expression "In the Holy Spirit" in this verse reminds us that righteousness, peace and joy are the work of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, conscience scruples about things which God neither forbids nor commands are the works of the people themselves who have those scruples. The Holy Ghost, of course, could move a person willingly and without constraint to decide to abstain from certain foods to show his gratitude

for Jesus. He would even find great joy, then, in abstaining from those foods to the glory of Christ. The Holy Ghost, however, would not fill his heart with sorrow and distress when his fellow Christians didn't choose to express their faith by exercising their Christian liberty in exactly the same way the Holy Spirit has moved him to.

Verse 18

o gar e^o toutw|doul eu|vn tw|Xristw|eu^o restoj tw|qew|kai dokimoj toij a^orw|poj .

He, therefore, who serves Christ in these things is well pleasing to God and approved by men. (Literal translation)

If a person has the righteousness of Christ by faith, has the peace with God which Christ won for him, is filled with the joy of salvation and, then, in connection with all these gifts of grace, tries to use his Christian liberty to the glory of Christ, that man is well pleasing to God. "In these things," would seem to mean meat and drink, etc. If a person tries to use his Christian liberty not to offend the weaker brother or to judge the stronger brother but out of love for Christ and consideration for his fellow man that man is acting in faith and has God's approval. He may also have the respect of his fellowmen who understand what he's doing. The weak Christian may appreciate him for not disregarding his conscience scruples. The Christian who doesn't choose to exercise his Christian liberty in just exactly the same way as he does, may appreciate him for not trying to force his freely chosen use of adiaphora upon him. Like Jesus Himself, who's motivating him, that Christian will increase in favor with God and men. Even those who are outside of the church may begin to sense that that Christian is being led by God. We remember how Nicodemus, even before he was in the Kingdom of God, had to admit that no one could perform the work Jesus did unless God Himself was with him. The early Christians of Jerusalem had the admiration of their community when they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrines and treated each other with Christian love and consideration. The approval of men is not an end in itself, of course, but it may give us an opportunity to tell the world about Christ, who lives in us and motivates us to such loving and admirable conduct.

Verse 19

a)ra ou^o ta thj ei^ohhj diw|kwmen kai ta thj oi^odomhj thj ei^o a) | h| ouj .

Accordingly, then, let us pursue the things of peace and the things which build up one another. (Literal translation)

What Paul has just said does not allow anyone to exercise his Christian liberty with no regard for the weaker brother, in such a way that might break and destroy his faith in Christ altogether. Nor does it allow the weaker brother to disrupt peace and harmony in the church by trying to force his conscience scruples upon others, an act, which would, and probably should, produce resistance on the part of the brother whose conscience the weaker brother is trying to bind. Christians should pursue things which produce peace among themselves. They should make sure that what they are insisting upon is truly Scriptural and then they can have the confidence that the Holy Spirit Himself will work through that Scriptural truth producing unity and peace in the church. They should also be very careful not to do anything to upset the weaker brother in his weak conscience scruples, but with the word of truth patiently seek to lead him to a fuller understanding of what God really does forbid and what He permits; all the while lovingly forgoing the enjoyment of Christian liberties which might be harmful to the weaker brother who is not as thoroughly built up in the faith as he is. Love demands that the stronger Christian deal patiently and lovingly with weakness trying to build up rather than destroy.

Verse 20

mhēken brwnatoj katal ue to e2gon tou=aeou=pahta meh kaqara/ aDl a_kakoh tw|a0qrw|pw|
tw|dia_proskommatoj eSqibnti.

Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things are clean but it is evil to the man who eats in spite of stumbling block. (Literal translation)

The work of God is the work he has begun in our hearts. You can destroy that work for food in either of two ways. You can eat something which a weaker Christian feels is wrong and cause him to eat it, thereby sinning against his conscience (cf. v. 23), an act which could begin to destroy *his* faith. Or you can destroy the love for your brother which the Lord has begun to create in *your* heart if you disregard your brother's weakness and lovelessly eat something which you know could upset him and be spiritually damaging to him. A questionable piece of meat would not be worth the harm it could cause to a brother's faith or to your own brotherly love.

"All things" are clean, once again, is not a generic term that covers everything under the sun, but from the context must mean everything we could call food.

Any food, however, can become not only unclean but actually evil if it becomes a stumbling block to someone's faith. For whom a certain type of food can become a stumbling block is not totally clear to me in this verse. Paul could mean that food can be evil to the person who eats it even though he knows that it could cause someone else to stumble in his faith. That seems to be the way Paul uses the word, stumbling block in the next verse. However, another interpretation could be that food is evil for a person if he eats it even though, because of his weak conscience scruples he thinks it's wrong. That would seem to fit with what Paul has to say in verse 23. The more immediate context of this verse, however, would seem to be that your eating would be evil for you if you eat even though you realize that your eating could cause someone else to stumble.

Verse 21

kal oh to mhVfagei=krea mhdeVpiei=oi non mhdeV0w|o90el foj sou proskoptei h2skandal izetai
h2Sgenei=

It is good not to eat meat nor drink wine nor (anything) by which your brother stumbles, is caught in a death trap or is weak. (Literal translation)

In the previous verse, Paul has told us that that which is clean and permissible in itself can become evil if it causes anyone to stumble. In this verse he completes the thought by pointing out that it's good not to eat something which in itself is clean and permissible, if we abstain from it so that our brother isn't spiritually harmed.

In verse 2, Paul spoke of the weak as eating only herbs. Throughout this chapter, then, he has been speaking in a general way about food (*broma*) but now he finally uses the word meat (*krea*) indicating that the weak Christian in Rome did have scruples about eating meat. In this verse, now, Paul says that what is true of meat could also be true of wine. Since drunkenness and gluttony went hand in hand in ancient Rome, what weak Christians believed about meat they could also believe about wine, or any other food, no doubt rich and unusual foods in particular. We almost wonder if we can detect here the seeds of asceticism which would eventually sprout into the monastic ideal. If so, it's interesting to notice that when it was held up as a holier form of life Paul treated it as a weakness which should be dealt with in patience and love, not a higher form of life which should be honored and emulated.

Out of love and concern for the person with extra-Scriptural convictions about meat, drink and other foods, Paul says that it's good to abstain so that we don't cause him to stumble, fall into a death trap or even become weak. The sequence here seems strange - stumble, fall into a death trap, and then become weak. The

word "weak" comes as a surprise. We'd expect a stronger expression like eternally dead. Paul here seems to be speaking like the late Mayor Charles Daley of Chicago when he complained, "I have been vilified, I have been slandered, my character has been assassinated, yes, I have even been insulted." But perhaps what Paul is telling us here is that, on the one hand, we shouldn't do anything which would cause a weak brother to stumble in his faith or even lose his faith altogether. But on the other hand, we shouldn't do anything that would encourage him to go on living in his weakness either.

Moses was ready to have God blot his name out of His book rather than to have God disown His rebellious nation of Israel. Paul once said that he would have been ready to go to hell if it would have helped to save the unbelieving Jews. Through Paul, the Lord was only telling the Romans that they should be willing in love to give up a few Christian liberties like meat and wine, if by doing so they could keep a weak brother from stumbling in his faith and possibly even perishing eternally. If a glass of wine and a steak would keep a fellow Christian out of heaven, they ought to be willing to give up that wine and steak, even though in themselves they were certainly clean, pure and permissible.

But on the other hand, we shouldn't encourage a weaker brother's weakness, either. The third word in the series in this verse, "weak" (Stumble, death trap, and weak), is the same word Paul used in verse one who is weak. Although we should patiently deal with the weak brother, patient dealing doesn't only mean catering to his weakness. It also means trying to strengthen him. At the same time that I as a pastor may choose not to take a drink in front of a member who thinks it's wrong, lest I bring contempt upon my office or tempt him to do something which is against his conscience ("if the pastor can do it, so can I"), I must also try to teach him the correct Scriptural teaching about adiaphora. By only catering to his weak scruples, and not trying to edify him, I could be encouraging him to continue in his weakness, a weakness which could eventually be the cause of his spiritual stumbling and death.

Verse 22

su\pistin e\xeij ; kata_seautou\ e\xe e\dw\pion tou=teou= makarioj o\qh\krihwn e\autou\ e\w\ dokimazei.

Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Blessed is he who is not judging himself in what he approves. (Literal translation)

Do you have faith? Paul here is probably referring to a strong faith, a faith which understands that all food and drink is clean and permissible to us, that in Christ our Savior we also have Christian liberty in these matters. To not judge yourself in what you approve means that you have no weak conscience scruples about what you eat or drink. The Lord pronounces such a man blessed. He can enjoy a steak and a glass of wine as a good gift from God in connection with Christ. He has a strong understanding of Christian liberty.

But even to that strong Christian Paul says, "Practice discretion and consideration for the weak. Have your faith to yourself before God." God and you know that what you're doing is permissible and done in faith. Not everyone who sees you, though, has the same understanding of Christian liberty that you have. I used to have a Baptist neighbor who usually didn't refuse a beer when it was offered to him and explained his church's stand to by saying that Baptists weren't allowed to drink in front of one another. I guess what he meant by that was that most of them probably thought it was OK, but since the church often took such a strong stand against it, if you were going to drink it was best not to drink with another Baptist for the other fellow could possibly hold to the church's official position and think that it was wrong. That statement, of course, was meant as a joke and to imply that Baptists were somewhat hypocritical in their attitude towards drinking, but "understood correctly" that could have been a statement of fraternal concern much like the one Paul speaks of in this verse where he, in effect, is telling us that the only time you can be absolutely sure that your exercise of your Christian liberty isn't going to offend anyone is when only you and God are present. Paul, of course, isn't telling

us that we should never use our Christian liberty. If that were the case, we wouldn't really have it. But he is telling us that in love and concern for others who may not be as edified on the subject as we are, be careful at all times about the danger of giving offense. Liberty without love quickly becomes a license for maliciousness.

Verse 23

οὐ διακρινόμενος ἐὰν φαῖη|κατακριταί, οὐκ ἐπίστω: Πᾶν δὲ οὐκ ἐπίστω
ἀνομιὰ ἐστίν.

But he who makes a distinction, if he then eats, has been condemned because it is not of faith, for everything that is not of faith is a sin. (Literal translation)

The distinction which a person might make had to do with certain foods. In Rome, some Christians were making a distinction between vegetables and meat. Vegetables they considered to be permissible food but meat they considered to be forbidden food. Their distinction was not Scriptural but they had made it and now if they ate meat they would be condemned, condemned first of all by their own consciences which told them that they were not acting in faith, but against that which they (in their weak conscience scruples) believed to be the will of God. Paul then adds, "Whatever is not of faith is sin." That's God's judgment. What they were doing was not a sin in that it violated a clear command of God but in that it violated what they in their weak conscience thought the will of God was and to sin against what you think God has commanded, Paul says, is a sin, a sin against God.

The warning for the strong Christian here was that it was not enough just to persuade the weak Christian to imitate your exercise of Christian liberty. You first of all had to edify him (v. 19). If you persuaded him to follow your example of Christian liberty, but he was not fully persuaded in his own conscience that what he was doing was really permitted by God, you would be causing him to stumble in his faith rather than to walk in Christian liberty and if he kept sinning against his conscience he could destroy his faith completely. In that way our Christian liberty could become a spiritual death trap for him.

What's the answer? Do we give up our Christian liberty entirely? Not at all. That would be entangling ourselves again in a yoke of bondage. But we will exercise our liberty with love, fraternal consideration, and often with restraint. But hand in hand with these things must also go instruction and edification lest the weak brother be encouraged to cling to his weaknesses and ever remain a weak brother.