

All Roads Lead Here: Conscious of Conscience
By Jason Huff
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Malachi 3:16-17; Matthew 8:23-27; Romans 14:1-9

Our final Scripture reading today is Romans 14:1-9. This is the holy, inerrant, and trustworthy Word of God. “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.”

America has had a crisis of conscience lately. The entertainment and journalism fields are being rocked with wave after wave of scandals as people come forward to tell about actors, directors, producers, news anchors, comedians, and politicians that were out of line. For once, it seems that people on both the left and the right politically are shocked and embarrassed. Movies are being reshot to replace actors; TV shows are being cancelled and re-written; news programs suddenly are missing the people their shows were named after! Some of the alleged actions were merely awful behavior, but others were criminal. And while apparently these bad behaviors were well known regarding some of these people, others are being destroyed without a shred of actual evidence.

It's not the only place we're seeing a crisis of conscience. The NFL is in turmoil over players taking a knee during the National Anthem. Players say they're doing it out of their crisis of conscience over problems in the country. Many viewers in good conscience feel they can't watch the games and support those they believe aren't patriotic. The 2016 political election gave many of us a big crisis of conscience when both nominees seemed like poor moral choices for the presidency.

I'm not here today to tell you who's right and who's wrong in all of these things. But what amazes me is that America has found a conscience when America has no coherent worldview. Who's to say that sexual harassment and worse is wrong? If there is no God who has made the universe and established a universal standard of behavior, that isn't it all just opinion? What makes hurting or killing someone else morally wrong? Most people weren't grieved over the recent death of Charles Manson. Why was what he did wrong? The only reason we can have for our conscience is God creating a universe with moral absolutes. It is ironic that we live in an age of moral outrage – because only a belief in someone or something greater than humanity setting the rules gives us the ability to know right from wrong.

It's good to have that foundation because Paul's word today is about conscience for the Christian. Our conscience is rooted and grounded in God's eternal standards of right and wrong. Because of our fallen human nature, we need those standards that are written in Scripture, God's revelation of Himself to us. Many moral issues are not in dispute when we read the Bible. Yet others are. That's what Paul speaks about today, and in doing so, he doesn't just give us an understanding of how our conscience should work. He tells us how our conscience directly relates to our relationship with Jesus.

So this passage starts with a weird concept to us: "One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables." Is there some Christian vegetarian plan that we missed out on somehow? Here's what was going on: in the early church, there was a real crisis of conscience about eating meat.

In the Roman empire, every piece of meat available in the market had been sacrificed to an idol. If you were a pagan, you wanted to hedge your bets. Every animal you owned was the opportunity to get the favor of the gods. You didn't slaughter your animals often because you needed them for other things – milk, eggs. So when you did, you made sure that you went to the temple of your local god and you made a sacrificial offering of it. The god's priests took their portion, you took what you wanted for your family, and then you sold the rest of it at market.

A lot of Christians knew this pattern because they used to participate in it. They'd given up all their idols, all the Roman gods, but the meat they ate had been sacrificed to gods they once worshipped. And they were stricken – was it sinful for them to eat meat dedicated to an idol?

Paul dealt with this straightforwardly in his first letter to the church in Corinth. He wrote them that there was nothing real about an idol, that we believe there is only one God, and even taking into account lesser beings like angels and demons, the sacrifice of meat to an idol was not a problem for believers because it meant nothing. It didn't curse the meat or the believer or anything like that.

But some people couldn't get over it. They obsessed about it to the point where they couldn't eat any meat for fear that they'd be participating in the worship of another god. Those folks wound up eating only what they could eat in good conscience, which were vegetables. And the two sides of the issue got into fierce disagreement. Meat-eaters said the vegetarians were putting limits on their freedom in Christ; the vegetarians thought the meat-eaters were committing a vile sin.

Paul sets up a few rules to stop this infighting. And the first one is this: *there are disputable matters where true believers can disagree faithfully*. There are many matters on which there's no dispute. Murder, adultery, theft, false witness – the Ten Commandments are crystal clear. And while not every one of the 613 laws in the Old Testament applies to Christians, the moral law we are to follow is very clearly laid out. Even some things our modern culture doesn't want to be clear about, like traditional marriage, the Bible leaves little room for dispute.

But on many other issues, it's not so simple. To eat meat sacrificed to idols or not? That's one. Another issue that Paul brought up was the issue of special days and seasons. Those from the Jewish faith were used to various seasons and festivals that God commanded the Israelites to observe – the day of Atonement, Passover, the Feast of Booths, the Feast of Weeks, and others. To them, certain observances were very important. Jewish Christians would have seen it as very important that Jesus made Himself a part of the Seder meal observed as part of Passover, for example.

Those from other religions may have had special days, but they would have given those up when they became Christians. They wouldn't have had a Jewish background, so they wouldn't have thought about celebrating Jewish holidays. And Paul said, that's OK. One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. And in the absence of a command from God, conscience rules, not law.

The church is in disagreement over holidays in general. Many don't like having anything to do with Halloween, even if it's a harvest party or a celebration of the Reformation which started on October 31, 1517. But other church holidays are up for dispute too. In the early Presbyterian church, every Sunday was considered to be a celebration of Easter. There were no holidays. Lent was rejected because the Roman Catholic Church said it was a time to make yourself worthy to participate in the Easter feast – and Presbyterians believed that it was only the blood of Christ and not anything we could do that would make us worthy of anything. Advent was seen in a similar light. There are plenty of Christian churches today where you won't hear any Christmas carols ever. And as Paul says, this is a matter of conscience – as far as God is concerned, He hasn't commanded specific holy days for Christians.

Over the centuries, churches have created a lot of rules for their members that aren't mentioned in the Bible. Some churches say you cannot drink alcohol and be a member. Others say movies and TV and secular music are out. Churches have banned playing cards, any form of games, and potential enticements to gambling. Russ, the pastor filling in at Bethel, tells how he used to attend church camp meetings during the 50s and 60s, and how despite 100 degree heat, you didn't dare go down to the lake and swim on Sundays because in the Church of the Nazarene back then, it was considered breaking the Sabbath.

Those are all disputable matters. They were ways that various churches and pastors thought would keep their congregations out of trouble. Maybe at times they did. But these are not the law of God. In the strictest sense, if they don't bother your conscience, they aren't sins. They are matters of dispute. None of them has a spiritual sense to them like eating meat sacrificed to idols. If that was an issue of conscience, then there are many more. We need to be well-versed in our Bible to find out what God forbids and what is merely an issue of conscience.

With that in mind, let's move on to the second thought of Paul's: *we accept one another despite our disagreement over disputable matters*. Paul calls the person who must be a vegetarian weak in faith, but he doesn't argue that his conscience must change. Instead, he writes, "The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him."

We never know when a “disputable matter” will actually come to someone’s rescue. There have been several stories about how Vice President Mike Pence, throughout his political career, has made it a habit never to eat with a woman alone other than his wife or to go to an event where alcohol is served without his wife. This idea has been called “the Billy Graham rule” because he was the first major pastor to make this practice public. Others don’t even meet with women except in a situation where doors and windows are open to others.

The press was all over him nine months ago when the Washington Post brought this back up nine months. They said Mike Pence was sexist, that he was damaging women’s careers, that through this rule he was establishing a good-ol’-boys club. Then the walls fell down around Hollywood and the press and Washington and suddenly, Mike Pence’s rule makes a ton more sense. Does everyone have to follow that rule in every situation? Probably not. We might feel this rule could close the door to women in certain positions, and that it isn’t very fair. But it’s clear in a world full of difficult temptations, the rules our conscience makes us follow can be to our benefit.

So when we come across someone who has certain rules they keep to practice their faith, we don’t look down on them. If someone feels they shouldn’t play cards or watch football on Sundays, we aren’t superior to them. They are trying to stay faithful – good for them. We pray that their walk with Christ would grow through it. And in the same way, if we think certain things should be out of bounds for Christians that aren’t really issues of sin, then we must treat them as issues of conscience. A fellow Christian drinks but never lets it get out of hand? A fellow believer watches an R-rated movie that doesn’t promote immorality and doesn’t tempt to sin? If that’s an issue for you, then it should be – but for you alone, not for them.

In fact, Paul says, “Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.” When it comes to issues of blatant sin, sure, we judge in order to help the person repent and get back on their walk with Christ. Jesus actually tells us to do this in Matthew 18:15; He shows us the way of reconciliation in the midst of sin. But why do we judge issues of indifference? Each person serves Jesus, not us. It is Jesus who will judge how we followed Him. It is Jesus who knows our conscience and Jesus who knows how often we broke it. On celebrating holy days and eating meat sacrificed to idols, on drinking any alcohol or watching a show, we cannot and should not be the ones to call someone out.

Our last thought flows out of that: *we are responsible to our conscience because we belong to the Lord.* As Paul says, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” You must determine your own path when it comes to issues that are not sins proper but things you believe you should do. Do you believe you should fast something at Lent or it’s a sin? Then do it. Do you believe it’s sinful to eat certain foods that are nutritionally bad for you because your body is a temple to the Lord? Then avoid those foods. Think there’s nothing wrong with playing cards with a group of friends? Then go ahead and play.

On these issues, what matters is what you believe. There is no absolute right or wrong answer; God has not given us an official “yay” or “ney” on them. But to go against your conscience for your own pleasure is sin. And to enforce your conscience on others – not the morality found in Scripture, but issues of your own conscience – to tell them what they can and cannot do is also sinful because you are ignoring their freedom in Christ.

Why does following our conscience matter so much? It is because we belong to the Lord. Paul says that whether we eat meat or regard a day as special, we do it to the Lord. None of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself alone,” Paul says. We are not our own gods; we do not choose the rules of the universe. We are responsible to a master, our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In life and in death, we belong to God – Christ is the Lord of both the dead and the living, and His own death and resurrection prove it. Christ’s sacrifice was made so that He would eternally be the Lord of both the living and the dead.

Ultimately, issues of conscience matter because we take our marching orders from God. We are responsible to Him for what we do and don’t do. The Lord is tied up in everything we are and everything we accomplish. And the proper Christian attitude is thanksgiving in all things.

Do we think that we eat to the Lord? We do. As Christians, even something as simple as eating is under God’s authority. There is nothing in our lives where God says, “I don’t care.” God may not give us any rules for some things; He might simply say, “Enjoy.” We might need to put rules around it for our own good and for the sake of our conscience, but God doesn’t do that on a good many things.

God says that drunkenness is dangerous to us and to be avoided; yet the psalmists and the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah associate joy and gladness with wine. Within its proper boundaries, alcohol is a good and pleasing thing. God says that the only proper place for the gift of sexuality is within a marriage between a man and a woman; yet within those boundaries, it is a good and pleasing thing – enough so that the Song of Songs talks about it in poetic detail.

We live and die to the Lord. So we must follow the conscience God gave us in order to follow Him faithfully. There are disputable matters, and we respect each other enough to let those be disputable. When we return to this passage after Advent, we’ll see how best to go about respecting both Christian liberty and the conscience. But as we celebrate this season of Thanksgiving and contemplate Christ’s coming, let’s give thanks in everything. Let’s live in accordance with our consciences. And let us thank God for sending us Jesus, so that we could know that we belong to Him, that He loves us, and that all that we now do is touched by the mercy, love, and grace of our Savior.