

All Roads Lead Here: Grumbling and Stumbling
By Jason Huff
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Proverbs 11:18-20; Matthew 18:1-7; Romans 14:10-23

Our final Scripture reading is Romans 14:10-23. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy, infallible, trustworthy Word. “You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God." So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall. So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.”

“Fall risk.” Maybe, like me, you’ve had that label put on your door at the hospital when the doctor thought it wasn’t a good idea for us to be on our feet. As we get older, the fall risk is real; our bones get brittle and we don’t react as quickly as we once did. Now in general, fall risks in the world are way down. Everything’s paved. Go to the store, the theater, even walking in here today, everything’s nice and even. The most you might have to watch out for is the curb.

And yet we still stumble a lot, don’t we? The rocks that line the sidewalk up to our home still catch people unaware. Walk in the grass and it’s sure you’ll find a hole. In the weather we’ve been having, it wouldn’t be surprising to find your foot sliding on some black ice. And stumbling is a real danger – it’s how my mom broke her leg two years ago. A year and a half ago, I tumbled on a ramp and wound up in the hospital for four days.

And if physical stumbles are dangerous, then we should really look out for spiritual rocks in our path. Because when we stumble and fall into sin, into disobedience against our God, it’s serious business. We harm our souls, maybe not permanently, but really and truly. We find ourselves questioning our salvation, or worse, we decide that it’s not so bad and rather than getting back up, we stay put in the spiritual graveyard we’ve fallen into. We have to be on the lookout to stay spiritually upright rather than tripping into sin.

Now as a quick reminder: before Advent, we'd reached Romans 14 and began discussing a very important idea to Paul – the issue of conscience before God. We were introduced to a problem in the early church: the issue of whether or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Many Christians had no problems with it because, as Paul said, idols are nothing; they don't exist, so meat sacrificed to them isn't somehow contaminated. But at the same time, many pagans who had become believers had once made those sacrifices themselves, and their consciences were deeply troubled by the idea that they were eating meat dedicated to Zeus or Athena.

We learned that Christians have freedom in many areas where God has not made His desires clear, from controversial subjects like drinking alcohol to things like playing cards. But we also learned that if someone's conscience bothers them, they shouldn't participate. Even if something isn't explicitly disobedient against God based on His holy Scripture, if we believe something is and we do it anyway, we sin.

So now we return to this idea, but we look at it from other angles. And the first angle is that of judgment. Paul says, "You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat; each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another."

Judgment happens in the church all the time, and I believe it is a reason the church in America has shrunk drastically. It always has to be said that there is a difference between judging actions and judging a person. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul is explicit about judging the actions of an unrepentant, sexually immoral person and removing them from fellowship until they repent. He says we are indeed to judge those inside the church. But even then, even in the face of gross immorality, the point of removing someone from fellowship is that they would turn away from their disobedience, turn back to God, and be restored. It was judging actions, treating them appropriately, and then praying for the restoration of the person responsible.

But judging people over matters of dispute is destructive to the life of the church and damaging to its members. And frankly, it happens all the time. My salvation has been questioned regarding the care of my family and relatives, from "allowing" my mom to live on her own to letting Jackson attend a public school. I've been judged for choosing too much praise music and for choosing too many hymns for worship. I don't think this is all that unusual for a pastor. And you have probably been judged in the church too, for wearing what you wear, for how you spend your money, for various things.

At its worst, it's devastatingly painful. And even when it's not terrible, most people don't want the drama; it's why even passionate Christians sometimes want to abandon the church. That's not something we can do because Christ established His church and commands us to worship and learn together. What we can do is to determine not to judge each other over matters where Scripture is unclear.

And let's be honest...so much of what we judge, we don't know a thing about. I could make a judgment call about why attendance at Bible study dwindled and we took a season off. Or I could look closely and see families trying to make ends meet working long hours, spending countless time spent caring for sick loved ones, coming home exhausted, and say, "I get it."

And ultimately, we won't give an account of others to God; we will give account of ourselves, what we did, and how we went about following Jesus or not. We can warn; we can show good judgment; we can convince; we can plead; we can pray. But when we play the role of judge and determine if someone's heart is right with God or not, we actually take over God's job. And that's not a good idea.

Because who knows what hearts God will change? God took Paul from a murderous persecutor of Christ's people to Jesus' foremost disciple. He transformed the tax collector Matthew into the author of the first gospel. He has made chief defenders of the faith throughout the ages out of former drunkards, cads, and scoundrels. So our first calling this week is to live out of love, not out of judgment. When sin is clear, we still deal with it with an eye towards reconciliation and forgiveness. Jesus taught us in His prayer that we are forgiven as we forgive. May we live as the people known for forgiving where the world would judge.

Moving on to the next part of the issue, Paul says, "Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way...if your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died."

We are to be diligent about the consciences of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. That means that there are some things we might enjoy that we simply aren't going to discuss or recommend if we know someone is going to stumble through them. The best way I can describe it is this: the church is supposed to be a safe place for believers, a refuge for us to get away from the world for a bit and reconnect with our Lord, to be encouraged, to worship Him, to pray, to receive strength from other pilgrims on the journey. It should be a place we want to be every week without fear of retribution or backstabbing or temptation.

But as we fellowship, as we journey together in life, we have to pursue God more than our own interests. Think of it this way: the last place you are going to find an AA meeting is in a bar. It doesn't make sense to have Weight Watchers in a fondue shop. (Though I think it's telling just how many restaurants are within walking distance of here!) When you are with your sisters and brothers in Christ, you don't want to be led down paths that make you stray.

What we recommend needs to be tempered with a realization that we are weak people. The reason that we can stand against any sin is not our own goodness but the Holy Spirit of God working within us. When you see the rocks that line our sidewalk, it's hard to believe how many people have been tripped up by them because they seem well out of the walking path. Yet one wrong step, and then you're on a rock, and then you may be sprawling.

So what does this look like for us? Our meat is not sacrificed to idols, so that's not an issue. But what are issues? What are stumbling blocks? For some of us, it's choices in entertainment. As much as I love the movies, there are certain films that I steer clear of. Same is true of certain books. They might have good lessons in them; they might show biblical truths illustrated in different ways. But if they are too sensual, I know they aren't a wise choice for me.

For others, films with a bunch of swearing might make you more foul-mouthed or make you more likely to tell coarse and foul jokes that Scripture says we should steer clear of. It doesn't make those films objectively bad, but they aren't right for those they make stumble. And if you try to recommend them and explain those problematic parts away or make it seem like no big deal, that's a problem.

I've known people who can't go to sporting events without getting riled up and agitated, who aren't nice people to be around during a game. That's a problem if "it's just going to a game." Some folks always equate going to a concert with getting drunk; giving you my extra tickets isn't a good idea. I can't speak to everything that isn't sin as defined in Scripture but would be disobedient for you to do. But I know I shouldn't plop temptations in your lap, either.

But there's also an underlying concern that's hiding in plain sight. For Paul to have this conversation with the Romans, he had to know the people there and what their personal concerns and hang-ups were. When Paul writes, "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall," he's assuming that the people of the church know each other personally. They know one another's joys and struggles, the heartaches and the blessings. They know enough to be watching out for one another spiritually, carefully avoiding setting up roadblocks and stumbling stones in front of one another.

What this hints at for us is a need as Christians to know one another better, to support one another more, and to be engaged with each other's lives in meaningful ways outside of a church service once an hour. The question I had to ask myself this week was, "Am I close enough to anyone that my debatable choices might have a spiritual impact on anybody else?" For the Romans, they were close enough that they were eating in each other's homes; this was not a theoretical debate but something they were arguing over in their dining rooms together. The early Christians lived their lives together – not in a commune, but meeting together several times a week for prayer and Bible study and fellowship.

Are we dedicated enough to our faith that we make each other and our spiritual lives together a priority? Because that's what Paul is calling for. And what I see today as I look at our new facility is that this is the size of a church that can do this. A church of around 100 people can make that happen. Much larger and it falls apart. You can't know that many people. You can't do life together with 500 people. But we've started doing it in the last three and a half years. We have grown in this. We know each other a lot better than we did when we started CrossWay. I think we can grow to care for each other spiritually even more. And I think we can grow even more in size as a congregation.

As we look around us at the empty chairs, we know there is room. But this place won't fill itself. We sent out 10,000 postcards at our old location and not a person came. We're in a better location now, but we don't have money for advertising that doesn't work. In today's society, nobody comes because they got a postcard saying "come to our church." They'll come because we've walked with them in faith, modeled what it is to be a Jesus-follower, helped them in their struggles and prayed for them in their problems, long before they ever walked in the doors here. The growth plan we have is the growth plan Jesus modeled for us – bringing a small group of friends around Him, teaching them, loving them – and watching it growing from there.

We just have to be willing to invest our lives and our time in other people. That means making choices that are difficult sometimes, being willing to give up some of our own interests some of the time in order to help others. Because the only way we make friends is to make time for them. We're all busy; we all have too much to do. Yet making time for others is the only way we are going to grow the church. And truthfully, it's good for us personally too. When we make time for others, our hearts expand and grow rather than getting turned inward.

This kind of sacrifice – of our own choices, of our time – is not easy. Yet it falls in line with Paul's final concept here when he writes this: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification."

The hardest thing for me to learn is that trivial matters are just that – trivial. What I think is the greatest new movie or the best sports team or what I think of a new restaurant, even my dearest hobbies – they are trivial. None of those things comes with me when I die. All the things that push at us from the world have very little eternal purpose, and may damage it.

The world has a strong pull on me, and of anything I will be ashamed of when judgment day comes, probably the most embarrassing will be time I wasted on things that mean nothing to the Kingdom of God. That's why – and sometimes I do better at this than others – I try to see everything, even entertainment, through the lens of the Kingdom and what God can and will show me through them. I pray you do too.

If the Kingdom of God isn't about eating and drinking, if our earthly pleasures are OK but not our ultimate good, if we start giving up those pleasures for the good of others, what do we receive in return? It's not a sacrifice without reward. The Kingdom of God, Paul says, is about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. It's pleasing God and being approved by those who follow God's ways.

What we're promised are the very things that we try to pursue in our earthly pleasures. It's common knowledge here at Weight Watchers and anybody who's studied how we eat that we medicate ourselves with food. We eat and drink to live, but nobody eats and drinks just to live. Food makes us feel good; we use it to change our mood. Some things like alcohol change it abruptly, sometimes dangerously, but all foods affect our body chemistry. We eat foods that aren't good for us because they set off all sorts of good feelings. Sweet makes most of us happy!

But what is it to give up something that gives us happiness for a few minutes to gain joy that will last forever? What is it to forsake a game or a movie or a food to have lasting peace? What is worth holding on to that is better than knowing we've pleased God? That's the point Paul is trying to make. He's calling us to get our heads out of the sand and into the heavens. Why would you rent a form of happiness at someone else's expense when you could own true happiness for free? It requires vision. It requires short-term loss for long-term gain. But that's exactly what we see in Jesus Himself. He took the short-term loss of His status, His privilege, all of His rights as the Son of God while He was here on earth, in order to experience the long-term gain of saving His people for all eternity.

So let's ponder it this week. As Paul says, "let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." We'll talk about that more next week. For now, may we grow in grace. May we stop judging one another on minor matters. May we move stumbling blocks out of each other's way rather than adding more. May we pledge to live more in harmony and community with one another. And may we give up our rights to our temporary earthly delights in order that we might receive the permanent delights of the Kingdom of God.