

"Not to Live by Religion"

Romans 14:13-23

¹³ Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. ¹⁴ I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. ¹⁵ If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸ because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.

¹⁹ Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. ²⁰ Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. ²¹ It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

²² So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin. (Romans 14:13-23)

What do people imagine when they hear the word "religion"? They might imagine some kind of sacred scriptures, religious austerities, a leader of a religious cult, or terrorists. People have such images of "religion", so many of them might feel suspicious about religion and want to avoid it.

One of the images that people have towards religion are "strict rules" and this applies to Christianity as well. But, our relationship with Jesus Christ is so big that it even goes beyond those rules. In this point of view, Christianity can be described as "The relationship with Jesus Christ" rather than "religion".

More than anything, Jesus put his relationship with Heavenly Father first, and then based on this relationship, he treasured his relationship with us. That's right. Jesus' love is not rule through laws, but time to time he valued his compassion for us more than the rules. As a result,

Jesus made many enemies. I believe that one of the reasons why Jesus was crucified is that his enemies felt hatred towards Jesus because he valued his relationship with people, more than he valued law.

The Gospel of Luke Chapter 6 says:

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. ² Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

³ Jesus answered them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴ He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." ⁵ Then Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

⁶ On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. ⁷ The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. ⁸ But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Get up and stand in front of everyone." So he got up and stood there.

⁹ Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?"

¹⁰ He looked around at them all, and then said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was completely restored. ¹¹ But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus. (Luke 6:1-11)

When we read this scripture, the word "Sabbath" catches our attention. This is Sunday, in present-day, and it was Saturday in those days. According to strict religious law, people were not allowed to work on that day because it was a sacred day. The laws were very specific, and there were rules such as; you are not allowed to lift up things, how many steps you are allowed to walk was restricted, and you were not allowed to make a fire.

On the Sabbath, Jesus' disciples picked some grain and ate the kernels. In those days, picking grain was considered as labor regardless how much someone picks. Therefore, the people who saw the disciples said "Why are your disciples doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

Also, **on another Sabbath, Jesus went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled.** (Luke 6:6) The Pharisees and the teachers of the law who saw this situation were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus. In those days' rules were getting out of control so that even healing illness was considered as labor. And, as you can imagine in this situation, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law thought that Jesus could wait until the following day to heal the man, not on the Sabbath because the man had been suffering from the pain for a long period of time. It is unlikely that he got injured on that day.

But, in that kind of situation, Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he made the man stand in the center of the synagogue, and said to them **"I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil?"** Then, he healed the man. They were not pleased to see that the man was healed by Jesus. The Bible recorded this as **the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.** Just like when his disciples picked some heads of grain and ate the kernels.

People knew very well about the law regarding the Sabbath. But, Jesus broke the law easily. For what reason did he do that? Jesus broke the law because he had love and compassion towards the people whom were there with him at the time.

Do you agree with me why I mentioned to you earlier that Christianity is not religion? We are not connected to Jesus by religious law, in other words, by rules. But, we are connected to Jesus with love.

We have read Romans Chapter 14 earlier. The main point was "What to eat" which we also talked about last week. That is in those days, some people refused to eat "food that is considered to be unclean" because of their faith and others ate "everything" despite their faith. It was like they believed in different gods. But, they believed in the same God of the Bible. Therefore, for those, who don't eat everything consider those who do eat everything as unfaithful. In the same way, for those, who eat everything consider those, who don't eat everything as unfaithful.

For this reason, they were judging one another. This is why Paul who wrote the book of Romans said **"let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister."**

It was clear where Paul stood. He said in verse 14,

"I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself." In other words, "I can eat anything. There is no food that is unclean."

When we read this verse closely, we understand that Paul's conviction came from "what he knows in the Lord Jesus".

What did he mean by "in the Lord Jesus"?

Perhaps, Paul had in his mind that Jesus had a flexible attitude towards the law just like what he did at the grain fields and at the synagogue.

Perhaps, Paul also had in his heart what Jesus said in Mark chapter 7 verse 15 through 23.

¹⁵ Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them. ^[16] [f]

¹⁷ After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. ¹⁸ "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them?¹⁹ For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)

²⁰ He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. ²¹ For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person." (Mark 7:15-23)

Paul had confidence, in regards to food based on Jesus' words, such as this. So, it wasn't a problem for him to eat all kinds of food. And, the biggest thing Paul learned from Jesus was love. As Paul said in Romans chapter 14 verse 15, **If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.** This part "What you eat" can be replaced with many other things around us.

An instruction manual is a user guide which tells us "in this situation do this and do that", and it is very useful. But, sometimes things do happen in our lives that can't be solved with the instruction manual. In fact, we experience situations that can't be solved with the instruction manual more than situations that can be solved with the instruction manual.

There are many parenting books published. Every book writes about good ideas of parenting and children's behavioural patterns. If you warned a child three times already yet the child kept doing the bad thing, you will give the child "time out". However that child's three bad behaviours could be at various levels. You can't say that you have to give the child a time out because he or she had three warnings already and because that is the rule. You come across unexpected incidents, not written in parenting books. That is parenting in a real life.

We must follow love as Pauls said, and live by the law. But, let's aim to be ruled by where love directs us, not be ruled by the laws. The more you know about Jesus' love, the more you feel free towards the law. Paul probably knew about Jesus' glorious love. Paul said amazing things in 1 Corinthians chapter 9 from verse 19 through verse 23.

¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

We don't like to change ourselves. Even more, we don't like to put ourselves in other people's positions. But, Paul became like a Jew to the Jews. And, he became like one under the law (though he was not under the law) to those under the law. Not only that, but Paul has become all things to all people. He said, "**so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.**"

I am going to talk about alcohol drinking since I usually don't have an opportunity to talk about it in detail. Sometimes people say to me that "Christians don't drink alcohol, do they?" as if not to drink alcohol is an important value in our faith.

This is because people view Christianity as religion. However, the Bible doesn't say that alcohol itself is bad. Even Paul wrote to his young associate, Timothy "**use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.**" (1 Timothy 5:23) The first miracle that Jesus did was changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana when the party ran out wine.

The wedding had more people show up than what they expected. And, during the party they ran out of wine. When Jesus heard about it, he changed water into wine. He didn't do an annoying thing such as changing all wine they had into water saying "You shouldn't be drinking wine!"

The Bible records that Jesus changed water into wine to let the wedding guests keep enjoying the wedding celebration.

As you may know, Jesus consumed wine on a daily basis. Jesus and his disciples had wine at the last supper. That is the Eucharist in the present time.

In Japan, to have a drink with others represents friendship, and sometimes people express their honest feelings about different things that they usually don't share when they are sober. Knowing that, some people suggest to me, a pastor, to have a drink with many people. Surely, I sometimes wonder if when I preach the gospel to Japanese people, I might be able to have a heart-to-heart talk with them if I have a drink with them.

However, in contrast, drinking alcohol causes problems. It is true that drinking could force your interpersonal relationships and you into difficult situations. As a result, you could lose your job or your family or both. The Bible clearly says, **Do not get drunk on wine**, (Ephesians 5:18) A sin triggers a chain reaction in our behaviour. When we get drunk, we feel larger than life, and then we may say something shouldn't have said, do something we shouldn't have done, or even commit various crimes. For that reason, we shouldn't get drunk. We shouldn't let the drink take over. Anyone who drinks think that they don't let the drink take over, but even so, many people let the drink take over. There is no excuse for saying "that happened when I was drinking."

I just talked about alcohol drinking, but we, Christians, deal with this kind of situation in our daily lives. Regarding this matter, Paul said in Romans Chapter 14 verse 5, **Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.**(Romans 14:5) He uses the words "be fully convinced". And, in verse 22, he said, **"So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves."** (Romans 14:22)

Following these words of Paul, I am convinced in three things in "my attitude toward drinking alcohol in a public place".

This is my conviction based on my interpretation of the Bible. I am not suggesting you to do the same.

The first conviction is that some people believe that "Christians don't drink alcohol". Some non-Christians believe so, and some Christians also believe so.

If I drink alcohol in front of them, surely they will be stunned. If I drink "Tequila" every time I have dinner with someone, some may enjoy it, but at the same time some may be stunned. As Paul said "**Do not by your eating destroy someone,**" I don't want my brother or sister to be stunned by what I drink. I don't want to trouble my brother or sister with such a thing. That is my first conviction.

Lately, I see people leave lots of things on the floor at the church. Many of you bring many things to church. Have you ever tripped over such bags, trash that someone littered, or unknown cardboard boxes? I don't trip over those items yet, but for elderly people, those items are hazardous. Just an inch high obstacle can be hazardous as well. For this reason, I move the item onto a table or onto a chair so that those elderly people can walk safely before an incident happens. That's right. Remove the item before someone trips over and gets injured. The most effective way of preventing stumbles is to remove all possibilities of stumbles.

Paul said in verse 21, "**It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.**" (Romans 14:21) An interesting is Paul didn't say "you shouldn't". He, who said "**use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.**", said "**It is better not to drink wine**" in this situation.

Because Paul knew that a possibility of drinking wine could destroy his brother or sister. There are only a few people who are stunned by a pastor who doesn't drink alcohol. On the other hand, there are people are stunned by a pastor who does drink alcohol. Therefore, I gladly chose the freedom of not to drink alcohol. That is what I believe Paul meant by "be fully convinced".

The second conviction is that by drinking I could say something or do something I shouldn't. I am convinced that I could hurt someone by doing so. If you drink with faith, you won't get drunk. That's not true. Anyone who drinks alcohol is under the influence. And, it can be lead to a trouble. I could lose my job as a pastor or even lose my family from the trouble I caused. I stay away from the topic a bit. Sometimes, I get together with my old friends. They drink lots of alcohol and some get buzzed and very cheerful, and some just kept complaining about things they don't like. Being in this kind of situation, I am thankful for a one thing. I only drink iced tea, but I can enjoy as much as they do without drinking alcohol. It makes me happy to see them having a good time, and also it doesn't bother me listening to my friend complaining about things. But, I am always thinking... there are much better things in our lives.

The third conviction is that although I have the 2 kinds of convictions, I don't live my life like a robot that only follows an instruction manual. While I keep in mind these two kinds of convictions, I won't restrain myself like "No matter what happens, I would never drink." I am convinced that I want to keep my heart free. (In fact, I was moved by the third conviction twice in the past. It might happen again in the future. I will talk about it when I have another opportunity.)

Lastly, I will talk about doubt that you probably have. Paul wrote about our "conviction" that is "good things that we decided". Where is the basis for Paul's conviction? For what reason can he say that his conviction is right? Other people don't know about it. Only you know what it is. What makes us have the conviction is that we are convinced that love is the motivation in our hearts. I think Paul is saying that if "unchanging love" motivated you, then either you should take action or you should remain there.

As we spoke already, God's love go beyond the laws.

Last week, we talked about how Jesus came to this world to give us freedom. This freedom has one condition. Do you know what that is? That condition is "love". If there is love that Jesus also recognizes, we should use this freedom. However, if this freedom is against love, it should be restricted.

Love comes in various forms, so we need to know The Lord Jesus' heart for each different situation. And, as we said last week, the love is not "because of love everything is ok", but because of love sometimes the part of love makes you say no.

Today, I talked to you about drinking, but it is just one example. We are in these kinds of situations on daily bases. We come across situations that don't go as an instruction manual so we pray to the Lord for pouring his wisdom upon us, and giving us conviction that this is your will.

As we close, let's read Paul's words that we should stand by our conviction in our hearts. These words can be the foundation of our convictions.

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet,"^[a] and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."^[b]¹⁰ Love

**does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.
(Romans 13:8-10)**

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸Love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

Let us pray that by reflecting on God's love, we can live in this world with the freedom given from God.

Translated by the Scarlett Family