

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY.

– JUNE 20. – ROMANS 14:10-21. –

"It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is ensnared or made weak." – Rom. 14:21.

THIS lesson the Apostle brings forcibly to our attention the fact that amongst those who have accepted Christ as their Savior, trusting in his precious blood and consecrating themselves to him, there should be permitted the greatest liberty of conscience. We need, however, to discriminate between liberty in the matter of conscience, and liberty in the matter of faith. These two very different things are very frequently confounded; and the Apostle's words in this lesson are made an excuse for fellowshiping any faith or no faith. On the contrary, the Apostle very emphatically shows elsewhere, in this very same epistle, and in all his writings, that matters of faith and of divine instruction are not matters of conscience at all; and our consciences (otherwise our judgments) are not to determine in reference to what we shall believe, in the sense of deciding our faith: on that subject the entire Church of God stands upon one platform; and whoever does not stand upon that platform is not related to the Church of God in any sense or particular.

St. Paul declared that platform emphatically when he said, "I delivered unto you first of all, that which I also received [first of all] how that Christ DIED *for our sins*, according to the Scriptures, and that he was raised again on the third day for our justification." Whoever received this testimony (that his sins have been atoned for) into a good and honest heart, accepting Jesus as his Redeemer, and seeking to live separate from sin and in harmony with God, and accepting from the risen Christ the robe of his righteousness, such a one was thereby "*justified*" from all things, from which the law could not justify. It is not, therefore, for one to say, "You may be justified through faith in the Redeemer, through faith in the precious blood, and

I will be justified by works of the law;" nor for another to say, "I will be justified, not by faith in the blood, but by walking in the footsteps of Jesus." No; there is only the one name given under heaven, only the one faith, only the one door, only the one way of access into the justified state or condition. We are not, therefore, to excuse differences on this fundamental doctrine, by calling them matters of conscience, for conscience has nothing to do with the matter. These are faith differences. He who has the faith rightly based is justified, and he who has not the properly based faith is unjustified and is yet in his sins.

Neither can this question of conscience excuse from obedience to any of the matters which are clearly and distinctly taught by the Lord and his apostles, by word and example. For instance, our Lord enjoined love of the brethren: it is not the province, therefore, of any man's conscience to judge that in his case love of the brethren is unnecessary. Again, Christ and the apostles enjoined upon the Church that we should not only symbolically eat his flesh (appropriate the merit of his sacrifice) and drink his blood (share his death – be dead with him), but our Lord provided an outward symbol of this to be commemorated annually and said, "Do *this*, in remembrance of me." And the apostles set us the example of doing *this* on its anniversary. It is not, therefore, a matter of conscience, but a matter of obedience, whether we do it or do it not. Similarly, our Lord declared the immersion (burial) of his will into the Father's will and the real baptism into death, saying, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened until it be accomplished, "finished," at Calvary; but in addition to this, the real baptism, our Lord at the beginning of his consecration symbolized it in a water immersion at the hands of John, saying, "Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." – Matt. 3:15.

The apostles also enjoined this, explaining that water baptism was "*not* the putting away of the filth of [R2167 : page 171] the flesh," but simply "the answer [outward declaration] of a good conscience toward God:" they instructed (Rom. 6:2-6) that the real baptism is a

baptism or burial of the will into the will of Christ, whereby the believer becomes dead to his own will and alive to the will of Christ; – dead with him to the world, its aims, ambitions, hopes, fears, etc., and henceforth alive with Christ, to the hopes and promises set before us in his gospel. Yet, while teaching this, as the real baptism, the apostles, nevertheless, clearly taught by word and deed a baptism in water, as the outward symbol of this heart-consecration and burial of the will, whereby our good consciences would testify or answer to our faith and obedience in the sight of fellow-believers. It is not, therefore, a matter for any man's conscience to decide whether or not he will obey the voice of the Lord and of the apostles: It is merely a question of *knowledge* and of *obedience*, both as respects the real baptism of the will, and also respecting the outward, symbolic baptism in water. It is a fact, that quite a great many (mistaught) have never learned either of the true baptism or burial of the will by full consecration into the will of Christ, nor of the symbolic baptism. And some have learned of the symbolic baptism who do not understand and have never performed the real baptism of consecration. And others have performed the real baptism of consecration, but have never performed the symbolic baptism. We believe that disobedience [R2167 : page 172] on the part of this latter class in connection with the symbol will quite probably be excused by the Lord because of ignorance: but, we have no hesitation in saying that neither the real baptism, nor its symbol in water are matters that can be set aside or excused as a question of conscience (judgment) upon which each has a right to exercise his own opinion.

In the lesson before us the Apostle points out that those who have become God's people by obedient faith and consecration (so long as they maintain that *faith* and *consecration*) are amenable only to God with respect to their views of his will on minor matters respecting which he has not given positive instructions. It is to him that each one is responsible. If really and truly they bow their knee to him, and if really and truly their tongues confess to him, no human being has either the right or the ability to intervene and to judge of their

consciences, in respect to feasts or fasts, new moons or holy days, eating meat or abstaining from meat – none of which things are regulated under the New Covenant. Others have the right to commend or advise on these subjects, but have not the right to command or condemn. The Apostle urges that since each one of us must give an account of himself to God as a consecrated member of the body of Christ, according to his own conscience or judgment of the Lord's will therefore, each is to remember that God is the Judge of all; and instead of condemning one another for conscientious differences with reference to feasts and fasts, etc., each should rather make sure that from his own life he remove everything that would be calculated to mislead or to stumble his brother by a violation of his conscience.

The important point of discussion toward which the Apostle's argument was directed was the eating of meat which had previously been offered to idols – and it would appear that nearly all the meat sold in the market places in heathen countries was so offered. Some of the brethren insisted that therefore they were practically deprived of eating meat at a neighbor's house or at a restaurant, and felt obliged to inquire as would a Jew. And these were inclined to look with discredit upon those who did eat such meat. The Apostle shows that his mind took the broad view, that since the idol was nothing, the meat could not have been injured in any manner. Nevertheless, while he would like to have seen all the brethren fully informed on the subject, he discouraged any attempt on the part of others to shame them into violating their consciences; and he points out to those who are strong, and who could see the matter clearly, that instead of ridiculing the weaker brethren, they should be glad to note their conscientiousness and to help them, for by ridicule and getting them to violate their conscience they might start them in a downward course which would lead to their destruction. Instead of forcing the weaker brother to use a liberty which would violate his conscience, the stronger brother, if he asked the weaker to eat at his table, should be careful to provide meat that had not been offered to idols, that the weaker brother might not be tempted to violate his conscience. Why should we be so bent

on using our liberty and forcing it on others when we see that it might lead to the injury of brothers for whom Christ died? Christ left the glory with the Father and humbled himself to man's condition, and even to death, giving up life itself for our fallen race: can we, therefore, if we have our Master's spirit, do less than sacrifice some of our rights and liberties in the interest of the weaker brethren? And by so doing your good, your liberty, your right view of the matter, would not be evil spoken of.

We are indeed the Kingdom of God in embryo, and as such we are not in bondage, but realize the liberty which the poor world, ignorant of the great Emancipator, Christ, and the great emancipation which he has wrought for those who receive him, does not comprehend. But, urges the Apostle, let us remember, dear brethren, that the advantage of being members of this embryo Kingdom is not merely these *liberties*, which release us from the Mosaic restrictions with reference to what we will eat and to what we will drink, but it means far more, even in the present life. The most valuable blessings which we have as members of this embryo Kingdom are – righteousness (justification through Christ) and its resulting blessings of peace and joy in the holy spirit. Let us not, therefore, think that in giving up some of our liberties we would be losing the blessings and favors of the gospel: quite the contrary, we have all the best things left to us, and may the more richly enjoy them by copying our Master's self denial in *sacrificing* these little liberties.

And he that in these things (verse 18) surrenders his own rights and liberties, in his endeavor to serve Christ, serving some of the humble members of his body, is both acceptable with God and approved of men: not only will fellow men appreciate such little sacrifices, on their behalf, but God also will appreciate them. Therefore, instead of contending about our rights and privileges and battling to have these, let us rather follow in the way that leads to peace and the things whereby we may become helps one to another as members of the Lord's body. Do not permit a question respecting your

food, drink or clothing to destroy the work of God – either the work of the development of his grace in your own heart, or by breaking down the conscience of a weaker brother, destroy the work which grace has begun in him. Being free from the Mosaic law we understand that all kinds of food are permissible, and none to be regarded as unclean, but if any one thinks that certain food is unclean (forbidden by God's command) it would be a sin for him to eat it, because he thus would violate his conscience.

Finally, brethren, the Apostle urges, it would be a good rule to follow, to refrain from either the eating of meat or the drinking of wine, or any other liberty whose exercise would likely do injury to another, either temporarily or permanently.

JUNE 27TH – REVIEW.
