

DO NOTHING WHEREBY THY BROTHER STUMBLETH

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

VERY EVIDENTLY the Apostle was not in these words endeavoring to put any bounds upon the liberties of God's people. Elsewhere he declares that the liberty of Christ makes us free. But he points out that while we have liberty to do things not sinful and not injurious to ourselves, yet it is part of our privilege and of our contract with the Lord to abstain from anything which would be injurious to others; and that we should seek to regulate our lives so as to be a help to others and not use our liberty merely for the flesh, for self-gratification. We are representatives of righteousness and should so deal with others, "Doing good unto all men, especially unto those who are of the household of faith." – Gal. 6:10.

In this text the Apostle is not referring to a matter where there might be merely a difference of opinion as between meat and vegetable diet. Such a question each should decide for himself. If one finds a flesh diet injurious to him, he should abstain. If, on the contrary, he finds that flesh diet is beneficial to him, he should use it. The Apostle's thought in connection with the eating of meat was in reference to religious convictions. In his time it was the custom for people to eat meat which had been offered to idols. No Jew would care to eat such meat. With a Christian it would be different. He would understand that it did not affect the meat to wave it before wooden idols, etc. Yet the Apostle goes on to show that to some it would seem a crime to eat meat that had been offered to an idol.

The Apostle's thought is that our conscience is the most important thing we have to deal with and should always be obeyed. The brother who would violate some one's conscience by eating the meat would be

stumbling and harming that person. Thus a stronger brother would injure a weaker brother. And this was what the Apostle meant. In the case of a brother who could not see as clearly as we, not only should we not seek to break down his conscience, but we should not permit even our influence to break it down.

It would be very proper for us in the case of a weak brother to explain the matter from our standpoint. This would not be seeking to break down his conscience, but to educate it. Then, if he should eat such meat with impunity – without the disapprobation of his conscience – we have thus made him a strong brother rather than a weak one; and this should be to his advantage. The Apostle urges that we should be on the lookout for the interests of the brethren.

SELF-DENIAL IN THE INTEREST OF OTHERS

St. Paul here is evidently laying down a broad principle of self-denial in the interest of others – a principle which applies primarily to the Church, but also to the world. He applies this principle, not merely to religion and to eating meat offered to idols, but he extends the matter, saying, "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor *anything* whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak."

There might be some weak brother to whom *wine* might be a great temptation, a snare. The Apostle urges that, while there is nothing in the Scriptures to forbid the use of wine, and while he really recommended it to Timothy, whose stomach was weak, nevertheless, *our liberties should be limited by the surroundings*. We know that wine was used much more *then* than *now*, and is much more used in Europe than in this country; nevertheless, we know that the effect of alcohol is much more hurtful to the nerves of people *now*, because the race is so much weaker than in our Lord's day.

When there was no particular danger along this line our Lord and the Apostles seem to have used these things with moderation. They

also counseled moderation – "Whether, therefore, ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (I Cor. 10:31); and we should not use our liberty in any way that would stumble a brother in any sense of the word. God's people are to have *love*, to be willing to *sacrifice self-gratification in the interest of others*.

So far as we are able to discern, intoxication is one of the most terrible evils scourging our race at the present time. Many are so weak through the fall, by heredity, that they are totally unable to resist the influence of intoxicants. Is it too much to ask of those who have consecrated their lives to the Lord, to righteousness and to the blessing of others, that they should deny themselves in this matter, and thus lay down some liberties and privileges in the interest of the brethren, and of the world in general?

Similar arguments might be used respecting the use of tobacco, cards and the various implements which the Adversary uses in luring mankind into sin. The whole, be it noted, is the argument of *Love*. In proportion as we grow in the graces of our Lord, in His Spirit of [R4919 : page 425] Love, we shall be glad, not only to put away all filthiness of the flesh for our own sakes, thus to be more like the Lord, but also, at the instance of Love, we shall desire to put away from us everything that might have an evil influence upon *others*, whatever we might consider *our personal liberties* to be in respect to them.

Another illustration of this principle would be in the observance of Sunday. The Jews thought it wrong even to build a fire on the Sabbath; and any one who was found picking up sticks on that day was stoned to death. We do not consider it wrong to do on Sunday whatever might be done on other days. But would it be wise to [R4920 : page 425] use this liberty? Our conduct might have an injurious effect upon others and so discount all that we could say to them along religious lines. They would say: "These people are not good. They do not keep God's holy day." They would not understand.

It would be well for us to keep Sunday more particularly than any other people in the world. In fact, we very likely keep it better than others; and this is right. This error of Christendom has worked good for us. We can have a day full of spiritual enjoyment. If the world understood it as we do there would be no Sunday to keep. On our part we would be very glad if there could be three or four Sundays in a week. In fact, with us, every day should be Sunday. We are seeking to serve God, the main object of life being to preach the Gospel, and to enjoy the "good tidings" – the Message of God's Word.

Our relationship to God is that of the New Creation, a heart relationship; and the blessing which the Lord gives us is as newly begotten children – not along lines of the flesh, but along the lines of the spiritual and of heart development, which shall ultimately be perfected in the resurrection.

True, whom the Son makes free "shall be free indeed" (John 8:36), and we should all seek to "Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free" (Gal. 5:1); but it is also true that we should be on guard lest we use our liberty in such a manner as to stumble others weaker than ourselves, not able to use the liberty of Christ discriminatingly, sometimes through lack of knowledge.

The liberty wherewith Christ makes free may be viewed from two standpoints: if it gives us liberty to *eat* without restraint, in a manner that the Jews were not at liberty to eat, it gives us liberty also to *abstain*; and whoever has the Spirit of Christ and is seeking to follow in His steps has already covenanted with the Lord to use his liberty, not in the promotion of his fleshly desires, ambitions and appetites, but in *self-sacrifice*, following in the footsteps of the Master, seeking to lay down his life, even, on behalf of the brethren – for their assistance. How different are these two uses of liberty! Its selfish use – as well as the selfish use of knowledge – would mean self-gratification, regardless of the interests of others; the *loving use* would prompt to *self-sacrifice* in the interests of others.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO OUR BROTHER

Knowledge does not necessarily mean a great growth in spirituality. A mite of soap will make a very large air bubble; and so a comparatively little knowledge might puff one up greatly, without any solidity of character. There is, therefore, great advantage in measuring one's self by *growth in love* rather than by growth merely in *knowledge* – though, of course, to be great in *both* knowledge and love would be the *ideal condition*. The Apostle inculcates this same lesson, asserting, "Though I have all knowledge and have not love I am nothing."

Knowledge without love would be an *injury*; and to consider it otherwise would imply that *real* knowledge has not yet been secured; but to the contrary of this the same Apostle says, "If any man love God, the same is known of Him." (I Cor. 13:2; 8:3.) We might have a great deal of knowledge and yet not know God and not be known or recognized by Him; but no one can have a large development of true love in his character without personally knowing the Lord and having obtained the spirit of love through fellowship with Him. Hence the getting of love is sure to build us up substantially (thus avoiding the inflation of pride) in all the various graces of the Spirit, including meekness, gentleness, patience, long-suffering, brotherly-kindness, knowledge, wisdom from above and the spirit of a sound mind.

Love, after securing knowledge and liberty, will look about to see what effect the use of liberty might have upon others; and will perceive that by reason of differing mental conditions – perceptions, reasoning faculties, etc. – all could not have exactly the same standpoint of knowledge and appreciation of principles. Love, therefore, would forbid the use of knowledge and liberty if it perceived that their exercise might work injury to another.

EVERY VIOLATION OF CONSCIENCE WRONG

But why? What principle is involved that would make it incumbent upon one whose conscience is clear to consider the conscience of another? Why not let the person of a weak conscience take care of his own conscience, and eat or abstain from eating as he felt disposed? The Apostle explains that this would be right if it were possible; but that the person of weaker mind, feebler reasoning powers, is likely to be weaker in every respect and, hence, more susceptible to the leadings of others, into paths which his conscience could not approve, because of his weaker reasoning powers or inferior knowledge.

One might, without violation of conscience, eat meat that had been offered to idols, or even sit at a feast in an idol temple, without injury to his conscience; but the other, feeling that such a course was wrong, might endeavor to follow the example of his stronger brother, and thus might violate his conscience, which would make the act a sin to him.

Every violation of conscience, whether the thing itself be right or wrong, is a step in the direction of wilful sin. It is a downward course, leading further and further away from the communion and fellowship of the Lord, and into grosser transgressions of conscience and, hence, possibly leading to the Second Death. Thus the Apostle presents the matter: "And through thy knowledge shall the weak one perish – the brother for whom Christ died?" The question is not, Would it be a sin to eat the meat offered to idols? but, Would it be a sin against the spirit of love, the law of the New Creation, to do *anything* which could *reasonably* prove a cause of stumbling to our brother, not only to the brethren in Christ, the Church, but even to a fellow-creature according to the flesh? – for Christ died for the sins of the whole world.

Let us take our stand with the Lord and determine that, in regard to using our liberties in any manner that might do injury to others, we will *refuse so to use them*; and will rather *sacrifice* them for the

benefit of others, even as our Master, our Redeemer, gave *all that He had*. Let us adopt the words of the Apostle and determine once for all that anything that would injure a brother we will not do – any liberty of ours, however reasonable in itself, that would work our brother's injury, that liberty [R4920 : page 426] we will not exercise; we will surrender it in his interest; we will sacrifice it; we will to that extent lay down our life for him.

"Thus sinning against the brethren, and wounding their conscience when it is weak, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat maketh my brother to stumble, I will eat no flesh forevermore, that I make not my brother to stumble." – I Cor. 8:13, R.V.

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