

Conscience (Part 3)

Conclusion of Series

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Yesterday it was related to me by a man that the pastor of one of the larger Worldwide Church of God congregations outside of Pasadena told a combined congregation of around 900 people on Pentecost "that he personally could not keep Sunday, but God may be working with these people, and they will be in the first resurrection." This verbally confirms a letter that I have in my hands right now from the Personal Correspondence Department in Pasadena regarding questions asked by a Worldwide Church of God member about doctrinal changes taking place. This letter says the following:

Faith in Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit makes a person a Christian, not the denomination that he fellowships with." We have always acknowledged that there are truly converted Christians who do not recognize the Sabbath.

Another Worldwide Church of God member who was present in the congregation on Pentecost when the pastor made that statement was known to have verbally expressed his troubles over the doctrinal changes, and then later said to a man who is now with us, "I guess this makes all the changes right." The man was now content that all of the changes could be justified.

I have some questions to ask you for your benefit in regard to what is taking place. Does that now make null and void the fact that the Sabbath is the sign between God and His people, that He will be their God, and they will be His people? Does it eradicate the effort God made to Israel in the wilderness when 2080 times over a 40-year period He did not give them manna in order to point out which day was His Sabbath? And if He did not also give manna on the Holy Days, we can add another 280 days for a grand total of 2360 days that the manna did not fall in order to show the people which day, or days, were His Sabbaths.

Were not Sabbath breaking and idolatry the two major reasons God pointed out to Israel and to Judah why they went into captivity? He says in Malachi 3: 6. "I am the LORD. I do not change." In Matthew 5: 17 Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." Hebrews 13: 8 says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." Did not Jesus Christ and the apostles clearly keep the Sabbath and the holy days?

What are we going to do with the scriptures that say, "Be you followers of God, as dear children," or "Follow me, as I follow Christ"? Can you see where this kind of thinking is heading? It knocks the props right out from under any authority God has to charge man with sin.

If men can nullify even one commandment of God, what is to stop them from reasoning that we no longer have to pay attention to parents, lying, stealing, killing, adultery, lust, or idolatry?

What is the nature of this God that they are now worshipping? Into what image is one being

formed? What is perfection? What is the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ? What they are doing puts everything into doubt when one feels free to say in effect that it does not really matter what God's law says.

I want you to see what Deuteronomy 29:14 in its context. Verse 1 says, "These are the words of the covenant which the LORD commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which He made with them in Horeb." This is a remaking of the covenant of Mount Sinai. It is a refreshing of their minds because a lot had taken place in the forty years intervening in between the time the covenant was first made in Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai). Time-wise, it is at the end of the forty years, and they are just about ready to go into the land. In fact it is probably the last month before they went into the land.

Deuteronomy 29 is that famous chapter which has the verse: "For yet the LORD has not given you a heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, to this day." (verse 4) So at the very last step before they stepped into the Promised Land, God says, "Moses, I want you to rehearse the covenant that these people made with Me."

Deuteronomy 29:14-18 I make this covenant and this oath, not with you alone, but also with him who stands here with us today before the LORD our God, as well as with him who is not here with us today (for you know that we dwelt in the land of Egypt and that we came through the nations which you passed by, and you saw their abominations and their idols which were among them—wood and stone and silver and gold); so that there may not be among you man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations, and that there may not be among you a root bearing bitterness or wormwood.

He is concerned about the kind of attitudes which will lead to apostasy. I want you to think about what is happening in the Worldwide Church of God so that you do not fall into the same problem. That is what He means by a root bearing bitterness. It is some attitude, some inclination, which produces apostasy. It is something that causes them to defect from God.

Deuteronomy 29:19 And so it may not happen, when he hears the words of this curse, that he blesses himself in his heart, saying, I shall have peace, even though I walk in the imagination of my heart—as though the drunkard could be included with the sober.

What is he saying? He is saying that it really does not matter what God's law says. He is saying, "I am going to do what I good and well please."

Deuteronomy 29:20-21 The LORD would not spare him; for then the anger of the LORD and His jealousy would burn against that man, and every curse that is written in this book would settle on him, and the LORD would blot out his name from under heaven. And the LORD would separate him from all the tribes of Israel for adversity, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this Book of the Law.

God is going to separate these people away who say that it really does not matter whether you keep Sunday or Saturday, that it does not matter whether you think that God really means what He says in His law. That is utter foolishness. He is going to separate those people away, and if I can just interpret it, He is going to make them at the very least go through the Tribulation. He is going to set them apart for adversity in a last ditch effort to try to get them to repent.

Do you think that history is not repeating itself? What were the two commandments that Israel broke? The Sabbath and idolatry. What is the Worldwide Church of God saying? It is saying that it does not matter whether you keep Sunday or Sabbath. They are as good as saying that one day out of seven will do.

Do you understand what is happening there? They are like the proverbial frog in the gradually rising water temperature. They seem to be blissfully unaware that their conscience has gradually adjusted so that they are no longer able to accurately judge righteousness. The leaven of false doctrine has corrupted virtually the whole membership and is rapidly turning them into different people with entirely different spiritual, moral, and ethical standards and goals in life. Their conscience is adjusting so that things which would have formerly thrown them into a fit no longer even trouble them. There seems to be hardly a ripple of concern going through them, even though things that we formerly held as most sacred are being ditched left and right.

I am going to continue this subject of conscience because never have I been presented with such a vivid illustration of what has happened to people where the conscience has adjusted slowly over this period of about seven years to the place now where they can announce the most corrupt things to the people, and it hardly causes a ripple.

We found in the last two sermons that conscience is described in the dictionary as "man's moral intuition that passes judgment on his own state." When that is applied to the Bible and God, it becomes the response of man's moral awareness to the divine revelation concerning himself, his attitudes, and his activities. Conscience is an aspect of our mind which either gives approval, or disapproval to oneself, one's attitude, and one's activities.

Conscience is an aspect of a person's free moral agency. God created us with the ability to have a conscience, but it is obvious, I am sure, from everybody's personal experience that everyone's conscience does not work at the same level. That ought to be obvious. Conscience functions according to one's education and experience. Since these are not the same in each person, this accounts for the differences in conscience from person to person, or I might say from Christian to Christian.

Now vital to understanding how a conscience functions is that it will adjust in the direction it is exercised. The exercising is a function of both the mind (the intellect) and experience. We learn things from books. We learn things from sermons. We learn things from articles in which the intellect is involved, and we make comparisons between what this new knowledge is telling us, and what the old knowledge and experience told us. We compare notes and we allow our mind to adjust in a certain direction.

The intellect is involved in the adjustment, or the exercising of conscience, but it is the conduct

of the person which makes it a part of the person's character and really nails it into the person's mind and life. Both of them together are vital aspects of exercising the conscience. This is what makes us sensitive to our attitudes and to our activities as well. This is vital to God's purpose because He wants us to have a conscience that is sensitive to Him and to His way.

We also began to explore that conscience and righteousness function together, because the degree to which one is truly righteous with godly righteousness, is what is going to adjust one's conscience in its sensitivity to God. So in that light it is absolutely vital we understand what righteousness is.

There is one aspect of righteousness we have nailed down pretty well because it has been hammered into our minds year after year after year, that righteousness is keeping the commandments of God. It is essential we understand that there is more to righteousness than just keeping the commandments of God. The commandments of God are the foundation, we might say, to righteousness.

We are going to go to Romans 4 in this effort to try to understand how conscience and righteousness function together. The section we are going to read has to do with one aspect of righteousness. There are two major aspects to righteousness, and this aspect is very important.

Romans 4:1-6 What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something of which to boast, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works.

In the Bible there are two positive aspects to godly righteousness. The one we have just looked at in its barest essentials is that righteousness is a state, or a condition, God declares us to be in simply because we are under the blood of Jesus Christ. This is a state not based on what we have done, but by what God does according to His grace.

We are declared to be righteous by Him as a result of the blood of Jesus Christ. We enter this state by means of being justified by Christ's blood. We have done nothing to earn it through any practical acts of conduct. It has simply been mercifully granted, imputed, or accounted as being there by an act of God, but it is very real. Do not denigrate it in any way, shape, or form. It is very real. It is extremely important because it is ultimately what saves us.

The second aspect to godly righteousness is that there is a righteousness that comes as a result of practical application.

I John 3:7 Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous.

I John 3:10 In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love

his brother.

This righteousness has its basis in obedience to God's instruction. This too is very important because this is a vital step in what produces godly character within us. It shows that we are following God, and thus a witness is made to the world because we are practicing righteousness. Therefore it is what separates us from the world. If you are practicing righteousness, it means you are then, at the very least, keeping the commands of God.

If you begin to keep the Sabbath, does that not separate you from the world? Absolutely. If you are keeping the Sabbath, does it not witness to the world? Absolutely. If you are keeping the Sabbath, you are then brought into fellowship with God and His people, and you become a part of His church. This is very vital. We have to have both of them.

The first aspect is the justification by the blood of Jesus Christ by which God declares us to be justified and righteous. The second aspect is the righteousness that accrues as a result of obedience to God, and by that the godly character is produced.

In the last sermon we had on conscience, we saw that the Hebrew word translated righteousness (which is roughly pronounced *tsawdak*) means equity. Righteousness is equity. It contains the idea of a scale being in perfect balance. A person who is righteous is somebody who is balanced, as measured by a scale. Who is the scale? God is the scale. His way is the scale against which the person is measured.

We also found that the Greek word *dikios* means the same thing. It means to divide each its due. It means perfect balance. So we have a harmony between the two words most commonly used in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. They mean virtually the same thing—to be in balance. They are in agreement.

The important aspect to understand here is that we have been seeing that righteousness goes beyond merely codified law. It is usually termed in the Bible "under law." We should look at any instruction that God gives, whether it be by command or by example, to be obeyed as if it were a command, as if it were a law.

In Genesis 18:19, God is stating something here regarding Abraham. He is stating a purpose for which He called Abraham. Abraham of course, as the head of a family, has the responsibility to God for the benefit of that family.

Genesis 18:19 For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.

God is laying a foundation for the purpose that He is going to work out through Abraham. That purpose began with Abraham. It continued on through Israel when they were in Egypt, when they were out in the wilderness, when they were in the land, and all the prophets that God sent, the judges that He sent, right on through all of the Old Covenant up to the New Testament times.

Now we find that God's real purpose is that Abraham is going to have a seed that is spiritual in nature. They are part of a new creation. Though the foundation was laid in Abraham thousands of years ago, we are to follow the way God described as "doing righteousness." We find that this way is outlined by law, but law is not all that this way consists of. The law gives shape and structure, but there is a great deal more than just meets a casual glance. It is the law plus a multitude of attitudes and actions in what is contained within the much broader term "love."

I John 5:17 All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.

Have we not all learned that the wages of sin is death? It is very easy to jump to the conclusion that if one sins, the death penalty comes on him, but this verse contradicts that. Not all unrighteousness leads to death. Therefore there must be unrighteousness that does not lead to death. Let us change the words a little bit. Instead of unrighteousness, we are going to make it simpler by saying "all wrongdoing." Righteousness is right doing, so all wrongdoing is sin.

The word for sin here is *harmartia*. This is the word that is most frequently used in the New Testament to indicate sin. It has nothing to do with law. The word means "to miss the mark." So all unrighteousness is "to miss the mark." You see, this too broadens our understanding of sin from its basic definition of being the transgression of God's law. Sin is "missing the mark."

The word that is second most frequently used is the Greek *paraptoma*. It simply means to turn aside, to go off a way, or to go off a path. It has nothing directly to do with law. Law would certainly be encompassed by the word, but there is more to righteousness than merely law.

Righteousness in its broadest sense describes love, because God is love. His every act is an act of love. His every act is an act of righteousness. This takes us into an area of relationships then that are covered by attitude. Would you agree that there are times that your attitude does not hit the mark? Are there times when your attitude is going off the way? You may not have broken any law yet, but the attitude is not very good, and that attitude could precipitate breaking a law.

How about the times when you are not very civil, and times when you do not use the right etiquette? You may not have broken a law, but the way in which you did something was not the way you know God would have done it. Are there times when you do things without the graciousness or the kindness with which it could have been done? Has that been part of God's way? Has that been a turning aside? Have you really missed the mark?

Can you begin to see there are times you can do something that is lawful, but yet on the other hand while you were doing that lawful thing you were missing the mark? You were missing the mark in your attitude, in your incivility, in your breaches of etiquette, and in the ungracious way in which you did what you did. Is it really the way God would have done it? Probably not. So you see, sin is not limited to things done by lawbreaking.

We have to understand that the Bible approaches moral issues as being either black or white with very little middle ground. This is why the Bible says that love will cover a multitude of sin, and that not all sin brings death. That is why it says here there are sins that do not lead to death. Now the sins covered by expressions of our love may be sins that would not cover the penalty of death. Why? Because what we do cannot cover that. Only what Christ did can cover

those kinds of sins.

He is speaking here in a way that we can understand, that if we do things that are righteous, it may cover sin, but not the sins that are unto death. But what do acts of righteousness, acts of graciousness, acts of kindness, acts of civility, acts done in the right attitude, acts of etiquette do? They enable relationships to be healed. They pave the way for reconciliation to take place, or they may keep a relationship going when forgiveness is extended from one human to another.

Are you beginning to see the drift? These righteous acts do not save a person from death, but it heals a relationship. When kindness is extended when somebody does good for the person who did them dirty, thus you heap coals of fire on their head that purifies the relationship. It is an act of righteousness. It does not cover a sin unto death, but it does cover a missing of the mark, or a going out of the way. Therefore it covers an act of unrighteousness, and therefore sin.

Romans 14:17 For the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

To make a fairly detailed study of Romans 14, you would find that this section clearly shows that righteousness is more than merely keeping laws. Righteousness, in its broad usage, is doing things the way God would do it. Romans 14 involves people who are strong and people who are weak.

Now the strong Christian, in this context, sees what is important, and morally and spiritually he is able to discern that which is important and that which is less important. He is able to make a proper judgment and prioritize as to what is important and what is less important. Again, within the context, he is prepared to ignore his right. Remember this. He is prepared to ignore his right if righteousness within the circumstance demands that he do otherwise.

The weak person (again within this context) will be so preoccupied with his rights that he will assume an importance out of proportion to their real value. Remember we are talking about human relationships. We are talking here about when one person offends another. A strong person offends the weak person.

It is also good to remember that both here in Romans 14 and in I Corinthians 8 the subject is not something, let us say, of the magnitude of a holy day. I want to make this clear. A holy day is non-negotiable because it has attached to it a "thus saith the LORD." It is non-negotiable. We are talking about issues that are not of that magnitude, but there is still a principle here about forcing or imposing belief on the strong person to the weak person.

Just to give you an idea of what Mr. Armstrong thought of the magnitude of what was being dealt with I Corinthians 8, I am going to tell you something I heard him say in a Bible study he gave on I Corinthians 8. I got the impression it was something that happened fairly early in his conversion. You might say he confessed in that Bible study that one time he ate something unclean in order to avoid offending his hostess who happened to be a woman he apparently respected a great deal. She set before him something to eat that was unclean, and Mr. Armstrong was betwixt and between about what to do.

So rather than offend her, he ate the piece of pork or whatever it was she set before him. He was confessing he should not have done that because there is a "Thus saith the LORD" about that. The righteous thing for him to have done would have been for him to just refuse it. His conscience was terribly defiled because he permitted himself to do something that his conscience was telling him was wrong to do.

I told you this so that you will understand the magnitude of the subject he is talking about here. It does not involve something about which there is a "Thus saith the LORD." In this case it involves something that had to do with eating meats or eating foods that had been offered to idols.

If you will look in the Bible, you will find the Bible appears to contradict itself in regard to eating things offered to an idol. There is really no contradiction there at all. It is just that eating meats offered to an idol is something you are permitted to do in some cases, and not permitted to do in others. It depends on the situation. I will let you figure out which is which.

We are dealing here with something where a choice of "to do and not to do" is the issue over something that is of questionable spiritual value. One may be free to do a lawful act, but as these chapters are teaching us, to do so at the risk of offense or division is to lose all sense of proportion, and to fall into an error at least as bad as the weak brother whenever he has done something against his conscience.

I Corinthians 8:1-2 Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know.

This problem with the Corinthian congregation involved clean foods that had previously been offered to an idol but were brought in to the local markets. The Greeks called it the agora. It was highly probable that this food they were buying in the market had been offered originally to the priests of Baal. These priests had far more in the way of offerings than they could possibly eat, and so they sold it in the local markets and received cash in return, which was a very profitable enterprise for that pagan church.

Now was this food (we will call it meat) spiritually contaminated? This was the question that was before these brethren, and of course before Paul. What we have just read gives us an indication of the error that those who are strong were likely to fall into. Remember I mentioned that in reference to Romans 14. We are told in Romans 8:1-2 that it is pride. Knowledge puffs up. The strong had knowledge. They knew what was theologically correct and lawful, but they did not do an act of righteousness in regard to their action toward their brother, and they fell because of the sin of pride. They forced the issue, and obeyed was what theologically correct.

Paul agreed with them that it was theologically correct, but he disagreed with them about what they did, and therefore it was sin. They had not broken a law, but they had sinned. It was an act of unrighteousness. Paul reasoned that since a person never knows all that he ought to know about a subject, the attitude that these people were showing was dependent upon their own self-sufficient knowledge, and that is what pride is.

I Corinthians 8:8 But food does not commend us to God, for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse.

Paul theologically cleans it up, you might say, and puts it in its right perspective, that there is nothing inherently wrong with meat offered in sacrifice to an idol. He is saying that food neither minimizes nor enhances our standing before God. So those who had pride were theologically correct. Those who were strong were theologically correct, and yet they were unrighteous in what they did. Paul is saying that there is no spiritual importance to this food, and therefore they should understand that eating this meat is not necessarily a right that they should insist upon.

I Corinthians 8:9-12 But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.

Their sin—their act of unrighteousness—is very serious even though they were doing what was theologically correct and permissible.

I Corinthians 8:13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Paul says that we should be willing to bend over backwards, as the saying goes, in areas like this to avoid insisting on a spiritually unimportant right. The subject does not end here. In reality God devotes about five chapters to it; six, if we include Romans 14. I bring that up because I want you to understand this is no little matter. Even though the breaking of God's law, which brings death, is not directly involved, it becomes involved if pride enters into the situation, and pride is the father of virtually every sin.

In I Corinthians 9 Paul gives himself as an example of how he gave up rights that were his by biblical law as an apostle in order to avoid offense. He is using himself as an example, and so he ends the chapter with one of the most stirring illustrations in the entire Bible of how he subjected himself for the good of others and the approval of God. He said, "I beat my body, lest I find myself cast aside."

In I Corinthians 10 he then gives the illustration of Israel's lack of restraint, lack of self-control, and because they wanted to gratify themselves, it cost them dearly. He gives a concluding statement from this illustration.

I Corinthians 10:14 Flee from idolatry.

Pride is idolatry. Pride is self-love. Pride insists on carrying out its right regardless of its affect on others. He is warning them that if they did not get control of themselves they would be stirring up the Lord's jealousy—His anger over the protection of His name, because these people who were bearing His name were misusing His name.

In I Corinthians 11 he shows them two more similar areas that they are transgressing in. The one involves hair lengths. The second one involves the way they treated their brothers at church meals and services, including Passover.

In I Corinthians 13 he reminds them that all of their vaunted spiritual gifts had come from God. They were proud of the gifts they had—their abilities, their talents—and they were actually claiming that the gifts were something that was inherent in them. So Paul reminds them that they were not born with these gifts, but rather they were given for the purpose of serving the church. He reminds them that each member is a valuable part of the body, and that God has set people in the church as it pleased Him.

You all know what is in I Corinthians 12. In I Corinthians 13 he concludes his instruction in this. It actually goes through chapter 14 as well, but in chapter 13 he tells them that all of the gifts are to be used in love.

Now I did all of this because I want you to show me anywhere in chapter 13 where love and law are linked together, yet everything he describes in terms of love is an act of righteousness. No one can surely doubt that. Love suffers long. Is that not righteous? Sure it is. Love is kind. That is righteous too. Love does not seek its own. It does not behave rudely. It is not easily provoked. It does not seek evil. And on and on it goes.

You see, we have the opportunity to obey God righteously not only keeping law, but adding to it all of those acts and attitudes that are surely part of what God is; yet they are not law. All of those things are included in love. All of those things are included in righteousness. The only person who is really free is the one who always does what is wisest. Obeying God's law is always wise.

There is never a time to disobey God's law, but there is a right way of obeying law, and there are wrong ways of obeying law. They can be done in graciousness. They can be done in full faith, knowingly, intimately involved with God, or they can be done harshly the way the Pharisees did.

Romans 14:19 Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify [or build up] another.

Here is the practical application. In this case Paul does not challenge the Christian's liberty to follow his conviction, but what he is saying is that our liberty must be exercised with proper reference to the effect that it is going to have on others. There is a way that we can obey God's law that is beautiful. It is kind. It is generous. It is good. It is thoughtful. There are ways that we can do it as though we were living in a straight-jacket, as though the obedience to God's law was a burden that we had to carry, as if obedience was something by which we bludgeoned other people with how good we are, displaying our righteousness before men.

The person who is doing things right is always going to be asking himself what will be the consequence not just of what he does, but the way that he does it. Is it going to build up, or is it going to tear down and divide? Paul is saying that we cannot afford to be careless. We have got to think these things through.

Romans 14:20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food...

Again, we are not talking about clean and unclean. We are talking here about food that people considered to be ceremonially defiled, or spiritually impure. Some who had the understanding that the idol could do nothing to it that would render it harmful to a person were going ahead eating regardless of what others—whose conscience was more tender about these things—thought.

In our day and age something that has really offended a great number of people and caused a great deal of damage has been our attitude toward alcohol. I do not know how many people have told me, as a minister of God, "The church taught me to drink." They told me this *after* they had become an alcoholic in the church, and *before* they were a Baptist who never drank it. You see, offense was created. Many times it all began at a Feast of Tabernacles. You would walk into somebody's hotel room and the dresser would be loaded with booze.

I am sure that other things could be brought up where people have been started on a course of sin by church members' attitudes toward something that was lawful, but abused by their attitude. Maybe the person who did the abusing could control the alcohol and never had a problem with it, but the attitude toward it was something that led the weak brother into an area he himself could not control. That is the kind of situation Paul is talking about here.

Paul is cautioning the Christian to be insightful and wise about these kinds of areas, because everything we do has to be applied in a spirit of love for the welfare of others. You see, it is not strictly covered by a law, but yet the act of wisdom is an act of righteousness, or the act of foolishness is a sin.

Romans 14:21 It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles.

This sounds like I Corinthians 8:13. Paul is consistent in his teaching to both churches. The advice is that the Christian must practice self-restraint, and so it is a right principle to claim less than his due, less than his right. It is wrong to exercise our freedom if somebody else is going to suffer. Even if we can eat and drink whatever we like, we should be ready to forego it if the welfare of our brother demands it, and so it has to be approached in that manner.

Romans 14:22 Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

Here is the crux of the matter. Brethren, in what does our liberty exist? You might be surprised by my answer. Our liberty exists in our relationship with God made possible by the blood of Jesus Christ. What was it that got Israel out of Egypt? It was God. Would Israel have a relationship with God unless God did what He did? No. Their liberty from the world, from Egypt, existed only because of what God did.

In like manner our liberty exists in what God did. Our liberty is in that relationship. Please understand that. If we are sons, and free it is because of His grace. Our liberty really consists in knowing that we are sons of God, and therefore responsible to Him for how we conduct our lives. With our freedom comes the responsibility to act like God would act, and that will always

be righteous.

In this context it therefore means there are going to be occasions where accepting a restriction might have to be imposed upon us in order that something else might not occur. But you see, it is going to be self-imposed. We are going to control ourselves within the framework of God's righteousness. Our liberty does not mean that we can do things others cannot.

Romans 14:22 ...Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves."

If our conscience is condemning us for what we do, we are not free. We are only free as long as the conscience is also clear.

Romans 14:23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.

Paul's conclusion is that the one who is really free is the one who is free to do, or not do, as the circumstance demands, and not the one whose conviction tells him to act a certain way regardless of its consequence. Do you see why? Because the person whose conviction or whose conscience tells him to do a thing regardless of its consequence is a slave to that conviction.

You are only free if you can choose to do the wise thing, the godly thing, and restrain yourself to do what is right even though it may cost you in terms of gratification, cost you in terms of denying yourself a liberty that God obviously gives. As long as we are simply doing what our mind is telling us to do, we are still a slave. There are going to be situations where you are going to have to decide "this way, or that."

If the strong person denies himself, his conscience will not condemn him. If he denies himself a liberty he knows he can take, but yet he does not take it because he is afraid of offending his brother, his conscience will not condemn him. Do you know why? Because he knows, and he knows that he knows he is free and clear. He has not hurt his brother. We are going to see how important this is in just a minute.

The weakness of the weak person is that he is not really convicted. Why is he not convicted? He is not convicted because he does not really know what God's will is. It is a matter of knowledge. He does not really know what is right. He does not really know what righteousness is, and he is probably going to do what other people do simply because others are doing it.

Paul is saying here that whatever is not from faith is sin. In effect he is saying that whatever is not done without a true knowledge of what is right in which a person goes against his conscience, he is in doubt. He does not really know what is right. He sees a person doing this, and he is not really sure whether he can permit himself to do it, but he goes ahead and does it simply on the basis of what the other person is doing. Paul said that person is inviting moral disaster. He is destroying character in doing what he is doing by acting on his doubt, not upon his knowledge.

Now why is he inviting moral disaster? Because the conscience will subtly adjust in the direction that it is exercised, and therein lies the danger. The conscience will subtly adjust in the direction of the person's conduct, and the person is weakening his conscience. Unless he repents, he will

soon have no conscience in that area.

Do you understand this is what is happening to the membership of the Worldwide Church of God? These people started out knowing better, but they followed the leadership of people they should not have followed. They went along with these people exercising their liberty, and little by little the conscience has adjusted so that now they find it virtually impossible to tell the difference between what is truly right and truly wrong in the eyes of God. It did not happen in big steps, but little by little by little.

Do you think this is a little subject? It is one of the most important subjects in the entire New Testament. It is why God wants us to be sensitive to Him, and that we work, we exercise, and make that conscience right, and know that we know that we know what is right.

Is it right to keep the Sabbath? You had better believe it is! Now they have gotten so bold they are telling them it does not matter. The degeneracy is carried way beyond the kind of issue that is being spoken on or written on in Romans 14 and in I Corinthians 8 through 13.

You had better be mighty thankful that God in His mercy in some way directed you to get up on your hind legs and get out of there before you get destroyed by having your conscience adjust to where it does not matter anymore. That is what the unpardonable sin is. The conscience finally adjusts to where you do not care even that Christ is your Savior, and we trample upon the blood of Christ. That is the way Paul describes it in Hebrews 10.

We must learn that in some cases the same action does not always apply. That is what Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8 are primarily about. It takes wisdom and insight to determine the right course of action. In Evelyn's and my case it took us years to finally decide what we were going to do. That is really why we left. We got to the place where we decided that if we stayed there any longer we would become like what we were being taught. What we had was too precious to sacrifice to that.

We have to understand that when we do act according to conscience there is a certain measure of good in that it does at least allow us to retain our integrity, our wholeness. We also have to understand that following our conscience (or we might say our conviction) does not make an act righteous. The act is righteous only if it also agrees with God's instruction. If you do not get anything else out of this sermon, I hope you get this. There are an awful lot of people who follow their conviction regardless, and they feel right in doing it.

I want you to understand this other aspect to it, that just because our conviction (or our conscience) is not condemning us for what we do, it does not necessarily mean what we did was right. In other words, our conviction can tell us that we were okay. Our conscience can tell us we were okay, and we were totally wrong.

We must understand that following our conscience (our conviction) does not make an act righteous. The act is righteous only if it also agrees with God's instruction. The righteousness is doing things the way God would do it. A person's conviction or sincerity that an act is right does not make it right. The only thing that a wrong act done with conviction does is enable a person to retain his integrity, all the while it may be doing great damage.

Now go back to the illustration I gave about a person exercising his right to drink alcohol before

a weak brother. His conscience will tell him that he did something that is lawful, and therefore he feels justified and right in what he did, because does not God permit us to drink alcohol in moderation? Yes He does. You see, all along it is doing great damage to his brother. What is God's solution for this? His solution is that a person be growing in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. If one is doing that, the person's insight and his wisdom is going to be continually adjusting, becoming more and more right into a keeping of the way God would do things.

I want you to go with me to I Corinthians 10: 12 for three pieces of instruction.

Principle number 1:

I Corinthians 10:12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

This principle is saying, "Do not take it for granted that your conscience is okay." The reason is that a good conscience is often the result of a poor memory, or ignorance. Therefore we should be suspicious of ourselves, careful enough, always looking for ways to change and improve. Always remember Jeremiah 17.9: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?"

Principle number 2:

Hebrews 5:12-14 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled [inexperienced, untried] in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use [or exercise, or training] have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

This principle here is that we are to be perceptive regarding the circumstances in which we find ourselves. The people Paul is describing in the book of Hebrews became the way they became through neglect, where they needed milk rather than meat. They had been in the church a long time, but they became that way through neglect.

Now the advice is this: In order to not be neglectful, we are going to have to be thinking. We are going to have to be comparing. We are going to have to be willing to ask dumb questions—things that we might think make us look foolish or stupid about what we are about to do. We need to be talking to one another to help each other clarify our understanding. These people did not do this.

Remember I said there were two things that impact on righteousness. The one is that God makes us righteous, and the other is that we practice it. Practice produces something. If you practice it, you learn to discern good and evil. The fruit of exercising God's way is insight, wisdom, and discernment so that we are able to think through situations, and then choose what the right course of action is.

Principle number 3:

I John 3:18-21 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed

and in truth. And by this [experience] we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. [Our conscience will not condemn us.] For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us we have confidence toward God.

Verse 19 says, "By this we know [by applying His way]...and shall *assure* our hearts before Him." The word "assure" means "will be persuaded." It can also mean "We will be set at rest." In other words, our conscience is not bothering us. A modern word is "tranquilized." We will be tranquilized. There will not be agitation in our life if we are doing what we know to do. Is that not the way you want to live? Sure it is.

We have three things that will help conscience grow.

- 1) Make sure where you stand. Always be questioning yourself, and if you think that such an action might be wrong, the rule of thumb is "don't do it."
- 2) Be perceptive. The people in Hebrews became that way through neglect. So think, compare. Do not be afraid to ask questions. Try to clarify things through the experience of others.
- 3) Put it into practice to keep yourself from feeling condemned.

Those three things, as simple as they are, will cause your conscience to adjust in the right direction. As this becomes a part of your character, discernment, insight, and wisdom will become a part of your mind and your operation, and it will lead you to being free to do what is right.