

Sermon Title: Everything is about Faith
Biblical Text: Romans 14:20-23
Teaching Series: Justified by Love
Preaching Date: May 7, 2023
Preacher: Jason C. Helveston

Romans 14:20-23

Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

We're coming to the end of the 14th chapter of Paul's letter to Rome, a chapter in which the Apostle has focused heavily on our relationships. He's paid careful attention to what it means to live with unity and freedom within the Christian community. Much of what he's discussed in this chapter flows directly out of his overarching instruction to, *Read Romans 13:8 ... "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."* Specifically, love is about not judging each other when we disagree on secondary matters. Paul mentions three matters of conscience causing tension in Rome—eating meat,

drinking wine, and celebrating certain festivals. Some think it's okay to eat and drink and treat every day the same. For others, those habits cause them to sin or at least to be confused about the will of God. Instead of simply telling these two groups of people to build communities around their preferences, like starting their own church or something, Paul calls them to pursue peace. He wants them to love each other.

Now at the end of chapter 14, Paul collects his thoughts and forms a kind of moral principle. He says to us today, *whatever does not proceed from faith is sin*. In other words, if you enjoy these freedoms (food, drink, holidays) it should be because of faith. If you don't enjoy these freedoms, it should be because of faith. Faith should inform all of our actions. To do otherwise is sinful. That's what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about why everything is about faith. I'd like to pull at that idea a little bit by considering what Paul's actually talking about when he's talking about faith. After all, faith is one of those common religions terms which we easily use without much thought. Yet, it's what were supposed to be thinking about, or perhaps thinking through, all the time.

Here's how we'll organize our time ...

- The *nature* of faith.
- The *obstacles* of faith.
- The *character* of faith.

[Prayer]

Movement 1: The Nature of Faith (vv.20-22, Romans 1:16-17; 3:22-23, Ephesians 2:8-9)

When we think about faith, a lot comes to mind. Faith is often a stand in for the word “religion.” We say there are many different *faiths* around the world. That is, many different ways of believing and seeing understanding life and ultimate reality. But when Scriptures speaks about faith, it's less about an overarching system of believing or areligious institution, and it's more about what connects us with God.

There are really two ways the Bible defines faith. The first is *saving* faith and the other we'll call *living* faith. Paul actually introduces his readers to these two aspects of faith back in his introduction. ***Read Romans 1:16-17 ... For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” Did you hear them both? Salvation to everyone who believes. That's saving faith. The righteous will live by faith. That's living faith.***

In a beautiful summary of the means of salvation, Paul tells the Christians in Ephesus, ***Read Ephesians 2:8-9 ... For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works,***

so that no one may boast. There may be no more foundational passage in the whole Bible to our understanding of saving faith than this one. *But what exactly is Paul saying?* Well, it maybe be most helpful to understand what faith is by first explaining what it's not. Paul says, it's not a result of works. That is, salvation is not a matter of what we have done but salvation is a matter of receiving (by faith) what the Lord has done.

The Greek word for faith both here in Ephesians and also in Romans is *pistis*. It about an assurance or confidence, particularly in the Lord and what he has done. Throughout Romans, *pistis* is the thing that connects sinful human beings with God and his righteous, *Read Romans 3:22-23 ... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* That's saving faith.

Historically, this idea was sharpened by the Reformers—the theologians who ignited the break from Protestant reformation in the 16th century—they thought it was important to distinguish their understanding of God and his salvation from the Catholic Church by developing what they called "the Five Solas." It's essentially a five-part explanation of salvation; *Christians are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, as revealed by Scripture alone, to the glory of God alone.* That's saving faith.

However, as Paul finished up his teaching around this tension in Rome he employs a secondary usages of the word faith. It's a living faith. Look at Romans 14:20-22.

Read Romans 14:20-22 ... Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. He summarizes the dispute and his instruction to love, but then explains it all through the lens of faith. Knowing you're free to enjoy meat and wine and every day as the same ... is a matter of faith. But that's not saving faith. That's something else.

Paul is describing a type of faith which persists after salvation. You see, faith is not simply the assurance that initially connects us to the grace of God, but faith is the means by which we stay close to the truth, beauty, and goodness of God in and through all things. However, contextually, Paul is saying faith will lead you to live in different ways than your brothers and sisters. And if that faith or freedom should cause them to struggle, that's not cool. So even knowing how to express your faith, requires faith.

Christianity is not simply believing in Jesus for salvation, in the life to come. Christianity is believing in Jesus for this life. Or as C.S. Lewis famously put it, ***“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else”*** (*Is Theology Poetry?*, 1962). It's about learning to trust the Lord in every moment, season, dispute, and decision. Stated differently, faith is about believing that Jesus died for your sins. But it's also about

believing he's alive for your joy. That's the *nature* of faith. But in order to live with faith we need to contend with the persistent *obstacles* of faith we face.

Movement 2: The Obstacles of Faith (v.23, Exodus

20:3, Psalm 86:11)

I think the way Paul is using faith in Romans 14 is primarily that second aspect, living faith. As we all know, living out our faith is deeply challenging. Daily we are met by obstacles which cause us to live without trust or surrender or patience.

Right? That's what Paul explains as he continues. ***Read Romans 14:23 ... But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith.***

For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. Essentially he is saying there are ways of living which do not come from faith. And remember, he's talking to Christians. He's talking to those who have saving faith. Living faith is impossible without saving faith. You can't build your life around a God whom you have not trusted for ultimate salvation. In fact, whatever or whoever you trust for you salvation you naturally build your life around. Martin Luther said, ***“Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God, your functional savior.”***

Yet, even with saving faith there are obstacles to living faith.

Notice, Paul says *whoever has doubts*. There are things which prevent us from embracing living faith. However, that doesn't mean exactly what we might initially suppose. The word for *doubt* here in v.23 is the same word translated *condemned* and *judgment* in v.22. It's the Greek word *krino*. Essentially, what Paul is getting at

is that if you have determined, after prayerful consideration, that something is not good for your soul, but you do it anyway ... that's sin. Even a good thing is spoiled when we don't act with faith. It becomes sin because something other than God and his goodness was driving or motivating the decision.

I think there are a few common things the Scriptures highlight that cause us to not live with faith. Three *obstacles* of faith if you will ...

- Disobedience is an obstacle to faith. Any time we disobey God we're essentially saying, *I don't trust you.* The root of every sin breaks the first commandment which is, *Read Exodus 20:3 ... "You shall have no other gods before me."* If righteousness living or faith is aligning our thoughts, deeds, dispositions, or words to the truth and beauty of God, then every sin aligns us with the character of someone or something other than God. When we seek to control people and situations beyond our responsibility, we're saying we are god. When we lie to someone or curate an online presence which is disconnected from reality, we're saying our reputation is god. When we allow our money to control our joy, decision-making, and calendars, we're saying money is our god. In each case we're not living with faith. Disobedience keeps us from faith, but disobedience is almost always driven by fear.
- Fear is also an obstacle to faith. Fear is perhaps the closest thing to faith's opposite. My seminary professor, Douglas Groothuis put it best one day in

class when he said, *fear is looking into the future and not seeing God*. It's seeing our circumstances only getting worse. It's thinking everything depends on us. Fear is a faith in the natural world and the wisdom of the world. It's the belief that God does not or will not intervene in your marriage ... your health ... your relationships ... your children's school journey ... our neighborhood's injustices ... or your depression. This is perhaps why many Old Testament writers taught their readers to not fear man or a future without God, but rather to fear God. ***Read Psalm 86:11 ... Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name.*** Fearing the Lord is another way of saying he's the one who controls your life, future, well-being, and joy. While earthly fear tells us life is about us. It's about what we do. It's about what we want. Faith, or holy fear, surrenders and trusts and cultivates a vision of the future where God is present and victorious. However, though fear is an obstacle to faith, sometimes we over corrected and think we're supposed to act with certainty about everything. But certainty also gets in the way of faith.

- Certainty is an obstacle to faith. This may seem odd, but one of the most tricky obstacles to living with faith is certainty. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it this way, "*Faith does not mean certainty. It means the courage to live with uncertainty. It does not mean having the answers, it means having the courage to ask the questions and not let go of God, as He does not let go of us*" (*To Heal A Fractured World*, p. 199). Many of us grew up in a church context where questions were cute when we were kids, but as we grew up or,

dare I say, matured questions became unwelcome and even viewed as dangerous. However, Jesus' followers were constantly asking questions. Jesus often even asked people questions. Jesus never turned away a curious seeker, but he did turn away religious people who acted like they knew everything.

I hope we see. Faith is about giving the Lord control of your spiritual imagination. It's allowing the Lord to help you see a future or possibility which human reason finds impossible. It's allowing God to be your peace when life seems disordered and broken. It's allowing the Word to shape your habits even when you still have questions and don't have all the information. Faith leads us to obey, when sin tempts us with fear and certainty. And living this way shapes us into a kind of people and community of faith, people with the *character* of faith.

Movement 3: The Character of Faith (Romans 1:8,12, ref 2 Timothy 2:13)

The character of faith is shaped in us because each one of these obstacles has and does prevent us from living with faith. And yet, in each instance of disobedience, fear, and certainty the Lord meets us with correction, grace, love, and forgiveness. Right? This teaches us the most valuable lesson of faith: faith is about the object not the subject. That is, our faith is only as strong as that in which we place our faith. God's faithfulness is not only worthy of our faith but also outlasts our faithlessness.

The reason we have faith in Jesus at all is because he had faith in his Heavenly Father. He lived a life of faith just as we are invited to do in Romans. In his faithfulness we find the *character* of faith. Theologian Michale Horton see in Jesus' "*act of faith that he represents his new human family and preserved in his vicarious obedience for us*" (*Justification - Volume 2, 442*). *What's that mean?* Well, through his faithfulness Jesus endured the obstacles of disobedience, fear, and certainty. He journeys through this life with faith and thereby makes the life of faith possible.

Faith keeps us connect to God but only because Jesus connected us with God first, and keeps us connected with him. Our faith is in the faithfulness of Jesus. And the longer we stay connected with him the more faith we express and experience as a community. Faith is generative. That was true of the church in Rome. Paul wanted to encourage them in that from the very outset of his letter. ***Read Romans 1:8,12 ... First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.*** Saving faith had produced in Roman Christians a living faith that overcame obstacles of faith and shaped a character of faith in their community. This is all a mark of the faithfulness Jesus.

You see, Paul told Timothy, "*if we are faithless, [God] remains faithful*" (2 Timothy 2:13).

- That means when we disobey, we haven't been faithful. But Jesus remains faithful. He loves us and shows us mercy and forgiveness. And his faithfulness grows our faith in him.
- When fear overwhelms us we're not being faithful. But Jesus remains faithful. He meets us in our fear and heals the wounds and shame that tell us we have to control everything. His healing increases our faith in him.
- When certainty deceives us and puffs us up, we're not being faithful. But Jesus remains faithful. He reveals truth to us, shows us our limitations and welcomes our curiosity. His lack of judgment softens our hearts and we learn to trust him more.

This is the *character* of faith. It's learning the truth, beauty, and goodness of God and allowing him to shape our spiritual imaginations. We imagine how righteousness leads to our good. We imagine his presence and power in all things. We imagine a love that makes space for being wrong and growing and asking questions. The *character* of faith is about learning to be in friendship with God; trusting his love and providence over our apparent circumstance ... together, as a family.

When we get that we won't make sure everyone eats meat or doesn't. We won't have to judge people who live differently than us. We can trust the Lord. We can live with faith, just like Jesus taught us.