

The Conscience
Romans 14
With Ben Midgley



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Romans 14 is a very important chapter so let's look at the background, what it is teaching us and what we must do as a result. The question of 'conscience'

arises naturally from the text. We all have an internal sense or compass of what is right and what is wrong. The problem is that it doesn't work very well. God has made us to have a biological conscience. It is a long time since the creation and sin has had its effect on the human race. It has degraded us in all sorts of ways so that biologically we are not what we were. We are physically affected by sin over the generations so that some people have a very strong conscience and a very strong sense of what is right and what is wrong while others have a very weak conscience and a much more blurry, vague, unclear sense of what is right or wrong. At birth our conscience is like a slab of wet clay that is affected by our childhood experiences so that the values we acquire from those experiences leave their mark on the wet clay. As we get older the clay gets firmer and we are left with a general sense of what we believe to be right or wrong. When we hear things we agree or disagree with we approve or condemn according to the pattern on our conscience. Paul says, "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" He feels trapped because even his ability to recognise right from wrong has been affected by sin. But then he says, Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord he is the answer to the grip that sin has on my life; my conscience. If clay goes hard you can soften it by putting it in a bowl of water and wipe away the impressions and imprint it afresh. This is one of the amazing things God does through his word and by his Spirit. He reshapes our consciences so they become more closely aligned with God's trustworthy truth about what is right and what is wrong. If you grow up in a place where if you do something wrong people refuse to talk to you abandon you, you could grow up thinking that is the right thing to do and you pass it on. If someone falls short of your standards, he's out because that has been your experience. That is not how God works but the gracious work of the Spirit teaches us to be gracious and forgiving towards those who have hurt us. People end up with different beliefs and values that are held in good conscience, genuinely believing that those values are good even if they are not.

Let's indulge ourselves in a fictitious story about a Muslim man from Sudan named Ibrahim. He eats only halal meat and never eats pork. After many dangers and difficulties he arrives here in a small boat and is put in a small flat in a little market town in North Wales. In order to get a grip on the language he agrees to read the New Testament with someone from Ebenezer and miracle of miracles he is converted to Christianity. We put on some food at his baptism. Someone takes him a sausage roll and says, "Here you are, show your friends the liberty you now have. You are free to eat this now." This is the sort of thing Paul was dealing with in Rome; people with different backgrounds and cultures meeting together in common worship but their consciences differ over subjects of culture and tradition. We are not talking about the fundamentals of scripture and the means of salvation but lesser things like what we can eat. Ibrahim has overcome the big stuff like the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, of not accepting the words of the prophet of Islam but he hasn't decided yet what he can and can't eat. Eating the sausage roll will not prove he is now a Christian. It is not the test of faith. But he is free to eat it if he so wishes. Must he? No! Can he? Yes! Does he want to? His own desire is not necessarily the will of God. Is his conscience sufficiently reshaped so that he can be like Paul who can take it or leave it? In the church people have customs and traditions about diet, days of the week, names, customs and practices. We all have our traditions but they are not the most important things. They have to be respected providing they do not transgress the truth of the gospel. Rome was one of the most

multi-cultural places on earth at that time. The emperor Claudius had revoked the expulsion of Jews from the city so a number of Jewish believers came back and reintegrated into the church with the others who were from other tribes and tongues and nations. Would their cultural differences and the degrees of their separate consciences be accepted amongst them or not? It is not going well in Rome so Paul wades in (v 1-6).

Judgement comes up several times. We are not just talking about looking out behind the lace curtains at the neighbour who is cutting the grass on a Sunday morning and tut-tutting. We are talking about a church ruling on how people should eat the same meat as the rest of us. They were making it harder for some people by deliberately putting stumbling blocks in their way to prevent progress. Paul is preaching from Lev 19:14, "You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind," Some people do not see things as clearly or have the same liberty as you. Don't make them stumble. Then God puts his seal on it not once but twice, by saying, "but fear your God: I am the Lord". The Greek word for stumbling block is σκάνδαλον (skándalon) from which we get the word scandal. It would be scandalous to do this. It has massive consequences as a deliberate offense to people. The kingdom of God is by nature diverse. Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Every believer belongs in the family of God. There are no second-class citizens; all are sons and daughters of the living God. We have a ton of work to do to keep it so. We are here on the merits of Jesus Christ and him alone.

In Acts 15 it says that the gentiles who came into the church would not meet with any stumbling block or scandal from Jewish believers. People like Cornelius would be fully integrated. They didn't have to be circumcised or keep kosher. Just be moral as every Christian should. In Romans 14 the same ruling applies in reverse. The Gentiles have to decide to allow the Jews into the Gentile church. When you put your trust in Jesus Christ you individually belong to Jesus; his servant. His word is your law so learn it and live and die by your convictions because each one of us will appear before the judgement seat of Christ in the fullness of time. Allow your consciences to be refashioned by the word and the Holy Spirit until we unite more and more with Christ and with each other. Paul has a strong faith and conscience but he is so gentle with the vegetarians.

Let's be clear this is not about matters of sin. This is about tradition and not about morals. We need to give up our own ideas and conform around God's definition of sin and what is right and what is good. If you want to please Jesus Christ who died for you and please your brothers and sisters in Christ make every effort to be gentle and faithful, (v19-22) as the key to righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Build up the church. Don't tear it down. Unite the church. Don't divide it. Keep the main thing the main thing. Work through things with patience, love, care and careful concern and God will be pleased.