

Temperance and Romans 14

ONE of the fruits of the Spirit is temperance, or self-control (*Galatians* 5:23). While there are many churches today who claim to have the Spirit, very few of them are teaching anything about temperance. Yet there was never a time in the world when there was such universal excess in appetite and passion in the developed countries.

Some of the biggest killer diseases: heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancers, have a direct relationship to food and lifestyle. Instead of taking care of the precious body temple that God has provided, luxuries are indulged in which cause overweight, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and breakdown of the cell functions and defenses of the body.

When Jesus was on earth, He recognized the relationship between bad habits and bad health. When He healed the paralytic, He told him, “sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.” (*John* 5:14). But many of the people in Jesus’ time did not want to change their lifestyle. They had developed a form of religion which allowed them to retain their sinful passions, yet feel they were God’s chosen ones.

It is not much different today, except that we now have huge factories that produce much of the food available, and they produce it for profit. So there are many more foods available which are unhealthy, or processed to the point that nutrition is lost.

This food situation we have today, is strikingly different from the food supply during most of the Bible times. In previous ages, food was mostly in the natural state. It was simple, whole. The types of refining processes we use today were unknown. So you won’t find a particular Bible story that imitates this modern condition.

But Bible principles certainly do address this matter, and these must not be ignored if we wish to understand God’s will

for our time. There are two principles which lay the foundation of temperance:

1. The Body Temple—the body is the temple of God. Don't defile it. From this principle we can draw all sorts of lessons by comparing what happened in the earthly temple. For example, Jesus cleansed it of the buyers and sellers and said, "make not my Father's house a house of merchandise".

We have the same situation today with the body temple. Foods are sold and consumed which are produced mainly for profit, or to make merchandise of the body. These foods often are unhealthy, and so the body temple is made sick, and so rendered unfit for service. The human body, like the temple of old, is turned into a "house of merchandise", which ruins it's spiritual purpose.

2. Love—this is the ruling principle in the Christian. Love "seeks not her own." (*1 Corinthians* 13:5). Food has now become a global moral issue. It takes roughly ten times the land to raise animals as to raise crops. *The World Health Organization* estimates that there are close to one billion people on our planet who do not get enough nutrition. Also, the gases produced by animal excrement as well as the energy required to produce and process the animals contribute to climate change. On top of all this, the treatment of many animals in factory farms is very cruel. Can we say that it is "love" to eat the typical American diet when it has all these consequences? No, not if our conscience is awake.

However, in spite of these weighty principles, many Christians still go on to deny that appetite or diet has anything to do with spirituality. They will often quote verses like "the kingdom of God is not meat and drink" (*Romans* 14:17) without considering what the issues were in that verse, nor considering that the same chapter would actually condemn their

practices.

So we will now look at those verses to grasp some of their true meaning:

Romans 14

¹ Receive him that is weak in the faith, but not to doubtful disputations.

² For one believes that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eats herbs.

¹⁴ I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteems any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

¹⁵ But if thy brother be grieved with your meat, you are not walking charitably. Destroy not him with your meat, for whom Christ died.

¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.

²⁰ For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eats with offense.

²¹ It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby your brother stumbles, or is offended, or is made weak.

²² Have you faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he that condemns not himself in that thing which he allows.

²³ And he that doubts is damned if he eat, because he eats not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

There is a chapter in Corinthians on the same matter:

1 Corinthians 8

⁴ As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one.

⁷ Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.

⁸ But meat commends us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse.

⁹ But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours be-

come a stumbling-block to them that are weak.

¹⁰ For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols;

¹¹ And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?

¹² But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.

¹³ Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world stands, lest I make my brother to offend.

The issue in *Romans* 14 and *1 Corinthians* 8 was the serving of meats that may have been offered to idols (the believers weren't sure). They wanted to make a distinction between the true God and false gods, so as to give a right example by their actions. In the past, the prophet Daniel had taken a similar stand on this matter.

Some of the believers felt that the false gods were not real anyway, so if they didn't know whether a certain meat had been offered to idols or not, then it didn't matter.

Other of the believers had a more sensitive conscience, and thought that "taking a chance" on buying meat that may have been offered to idols was wrong.

Paul wrote the believers and told them that sin was a matter of the conscience or heart. The meat itself was not polluted, because these false gods did not exist. Therefore, if they didn't know, and it didn't bother them, then they had a clean conscience before God.

But the ones with a weaker conscience still felt troubled. They thought, "if I don't know, then I shouldn't partake of it." They did not want to do anything that might even have the appearance or possibility of being wrong.

So Paul counseled them to take care of each other. If eating the meat from the market might offend a brother with a weak

conscience, then don't do it! Love is the rule, and love considers others.

Some people today have used these verses to say that there should be no distinction between good or bad foods, and that food has nothing to do with faith in Christ.

But the issue in this case was not the quality of the food. There was nothing poisonous or dangerous in the food itself. Nor was it a case of making "man-made dietary laws" for that would have been legalism, and then Paul would have addressed it differently.

If these distinctions between meats offered to idols were a case of legalism, then it would have been entirely wrong for Paul to advise them "if meat offends my brother, then I will eat no meat."

Let's apply this to a known case of legalism, just to compare. In the Galatian church, a false gospel was being taught. Certain teachers were saying that it was necessary to be circumcised. But the symbol of circumcision, originally a sign of righteousness by faith when it was given to Abraham, had become perverted into a sign of righteousness by works, or by flesh. In Abraham's day, first came the faith, then came the circumcision. But in Christ's day, circumcision had become a substitute for faith. This was legalism.

In this case, Paul did NOT say,

"If my lack of circumcision bothers my brother, then I will be circumcised so as not to offend him."

On the contrary, he told them that if they were circumcised, Christ would be of no profit to them!

Paul never supported legalism. But he did support the abstaining from certain meats if a brother's conscience was bothered. Therefore, legalism was not an issue in *Romans 14*. Neither was temperance, since the problem was not appetite, but simply avoiding the appearance of evil in the market

place.

Now let's look at those verses in light of the problems caused by the misappropriation of foods in our day. Does "my meat" "offend my brother"? If I eat a diet of animal flesh, and consequently my brother in another part of the world has to go hungry, what would love do? Paul said, "if meat offends my brother, then I will eat no meat."

The way it is interpreted today is:

"If meat offends my brother, then too bad. The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, so I'll just go on doing as I please."

This is certainly not love, and therefore it is not "righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" either. It is a misapplication of the Scriptures that is designed to stifle the conscience. It is taking the Word of God and pouring Babylonian wine (a false meaning) into it so that the people who take it in become confused.

Love means thinking of others. In this age, we are a global community and the actions of one nation affect the others.

"For meat destroy not the work of God."