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**Series: Romans: The Just Shall Live by Faith**  
**Message: Alcohol and Liberty, What's a Christian to Do?**

**Transcribed Message**  
**November 19, 2023**  
**Romans 14**

The preacher was finishing a very fiery and passionate message on the dangers and evils of alcohol. He came to the end of his message and he said if I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and I would throw it in the river. He went on to say if I had all the wine in the world, I'd take it and throw it in the river. If I had all the whiskey and all the rum and all the vodka in all the world, I'd take it and throw it all in the river. He prayed and then sat down. The song leader got up and sheepishly said, our last song of the morning is "Shall We Gather at the River". It's not exactly the application I'm sure the man had in mind but I suppose it made a point.

We've been working our way through Romans, Paul's *magnum opus*. We've found our way through this 14<sup>th</sup> chapter and as we've gone through this 14<sup>th</sup> chapter we realized that Paul is dealing with very practical, very down-to-earth difficulties that were dividing the church at Rome. Things that in some measure we can relate to something not so much. They were dividing over diets. What can we eat? What can't we eat? Coming out of Jewish backgrounds where there were certain restrictions of the law. These new believers were uncertain as to what that looked like living under the New Covenant. They were struggling with matters related to days. We have to keep doing this. We have to do it in the same way. Every day unto the Lord. Then of course the matter that Paul brings up of drink. All of these things were a part of what was dividing the church in the 1<sup>st</sup> century of Rome. When we have looked repeatedly at the list of things that often times the church today has discussions about things that Paul would put in the category 14 and verse 1 of opinions. I didn't put the first word at the front because of alphabetizing of these. It just was the one that was at the top. I would think that it is probably still true today that if you were to do a survey within most evangelical churches there would be kind of a range of decisions and different ideas as to what that looks like. When we come this morning to this 14<sup>th</sup> chapter kind of summarizing and

bringing together in this very practical way, I made the determination whether it was a good decision or not step into this matter of what is the Christian to do today with regard to this matter of alcohol. And by the way, the IT people told me this morning that my email account is not functioning. It is not working. So please send any comments to other staff members whose boxes are wide open.

Let's think together this morning about this. This is really a summary of what I think Paul said in that 14<sup>th</sup> chapter about any of these topics. I think he would say to us never allow your conscience to be determined by another person's conscience. That's something that he has said in one way or another all through this 14<sup>th</sup> chapter. This is between you and the Lord. This is a matter of personal conviction. Somebody else's conviction does not necessarily mean that it should it become yours. But at the same time, we always want to be mindful, he says, of another person's conscience and we don't want to violate or cause them harm or cause them to stumble. That's kind of the gist of what we're looking at this morning as we bring these thoughts together.

let's step into that. I want to begin with some comments that I'm going to think of in terms of review because everything I'm saying this morning is really filtered through this 14<sup>th</sup> chapter and what we've learned by way of these principles. Paul is teaching this 14<sup>th</sup> chapter about this matter of Christian liberty and Christian freedom. That's the underlying theme of this 14<sup>th</sup> chapter. What does that look like? What does that mean? As we've seen that, we see that it revolves around two groups. Not three groups or four groups, but two groups. Those who are strong and those who are weak. All the things that he has said relate to one or other of those groups. It's really as we think about that as we come to this discussion this morning in light of that matter of being strong or weak we want to be very clear that as we talk specifically about this matter of Christian and the use of alcohol, we're not saying the strong is someone who can handle alcohol and the weak is someone who can't. that's not what's going on in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter. It is an understanding of Christian liberty. The strong understand the doctrine of Christian liberty. They understand the whole matter of Christian freedom and what that looks like. The weak does not. They haven't been disciplined. They haven't grown. They haven't been instructed. Paul says we need to be patient with them. They're weak in the faith. And so that needs to be very clearly understood that this isn't a matter of addiction. It

isn't a matter of propensity. That is not what Paul is dealing with. He's talking about those who are weak in the faith with regard to this doctrine of Christian liberty.

The second thing I would note is Paul has already made clear that all things are good. All things are good. He said that in verse 20. Everything is clean. everything is to be enjoyed. He'll say in another passage that we'll reference later that all things are available to us. All things are lawful. Jesus made the same point in Mark 6 when he declared that everything was available for us to enjoy that which God has created.

Thirdly, Paul has made equally clear that not all things are profitable. All things are lawful but not all things are profitable. That's part of what we need to understand here. When Paul says in verse 21 of this 14<sup>th</sup> chapter it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble, that's what he's saying. It's lawful. It's good. It's clean. It's created by God to be enjoyed, but understand the context. Understand your situation. Understand where you find yourself.

The last thing is the overriding factor is love. The overriding factor is love. We've said repeatedly that this 14<sup>th</sup> chapter is really built on the foundation of Romans 12 and 13. In Romans 12 and 13 Paul repeatedly was teaching, knowing full well what he was to deal with in chapter 14. He kept saying you need to love each other and need to love each other well. You need to yield to one another in the body of Christ.

Let's look then this morning at the Bible, the Christian and alcohol. I would say this. I think there are three common positions within the evangelical church because that's what we're talking about. We're talking about people like ourselves who love God and love the gospel, who love the word and who want to submit to it. If you just took groups like ours and did a survey, I think this is what you would find in almost every one of those churches. I think you'd find these three views represented not necessarily equally but they would be represented. The first one is that of prohibition. Prohibition. Someone would say well alcohol is evil and drinking is sin. I don't want to have anything to do with it. It should be prohibited. somebody else says abstention is really the way we should approach this. Alcohol is not evil. Drinking is not sinful, but as a Christian I want to be mindful and I, out of a spirit of love, want to refrain and I don't want somebody else to stumble so therefore I'm not going to participate. There are dangers that are involved in this and I just want to be cautious and so I'm going to abstain. Then the third position

would be that of moderation. Drinking isn't sinful. My conscience and my circumstance allow me to participate. God has said this is good, clean, a part of his creative order and so I'm going to enjoy. When you look at those three, I would imagine this morning if we had a show of hands and I asked how many of you are in category one, there would be a few hands no doubt. If I said how many of you are in category two there would be hands that go up. If I said how many would be in category three, there would be hands. I think all three of these are likely represented here.

let me just make a couple of observations and these aren't points in your outline. These are just things that I wanted to say as we walk our way through this. First of all, just full disclosure so you know where I'm coming from. I'm in camp number two. I'm in the camp of abstaining. I'm not saying that to in any way persuade you. I don't have a desire this morning to persuade you to take my position. That's not my purpose. I don't have any desire to condemn anybody for their view. But just so you know where I'm coming from, I come from camp number two. pretty much all of my life that's been my position. The 52 years of my life ... wait a minute! That's unfair for you to laugh. The 52 years of my life that I have legally been able to drink, and where I grew up that age was 10. So do the math. For basically 52 years of my life, you can take the total alcohol consumption that I have taken in and it probably wouldn't fill a small glass. That just has been my experience. When our only daughter Mary was born, we were living in Dallas. Mary was born at Medical City Dallas and as part of the celebration they would bring you a wonderful meal before you went home and they brought a little bottle of champagne. Bonnie and I ate our meal. We looked at each other and said why not. So we popped it. I don't remember if it popped. It probably didn't even pop. We poured ourselves a glass, took a drink, looked at each other and said people really like this stuff? And we moved on. I kinda wish I had kept a little bottle just as a souvenir but all in all that's where I come from.

When you look at these views again, this is reflective of the church in America. It's not necessarily reflective of the church in other parts of the world. In Europe this is probably not a big issue. There are different cultures, different contexts, different settings. In other parts of the world if you said we're going to do a study on Christians and alcohol, they'd probably wonder what you've got to say about that. It is just a

different culture that we find ourselves in, and I think as we'll see as we go along those things need to be acknowledged and realized.

But within the evangelical church for instance you're familiar probably with the name RC Sproul. He is with the Lord now. RC Sproul thought wine and alcohol was a wonderful gift of God and he freely participated when the setting and the situation allowed for it. John MacArthur is another name that I'm sure you're familiar with. He and RC Sproul were very close friends. They agreed on and discussed doctrine and theology on many points. On other points they disagreed and this was one of them. MacArthur basically thinks it's not a biblical stance for the Christian to be participating today in the use of alcohol. And then you have a guy like John Piper, a name that I'm sure many of you know and Piper says it's not unbiblical. It's just unwise. So right there within the leadership in many ways of the evangelical church you have three names that all fit in some regard in these positions. I think it's just reflective of that.

I read a blog this past week, a blog by a reformed person and he was writing from the vantage point of within the reformed movement. In the reformed church, there is a group called young, restless, and reformed. This article was written to those, primarily young man I would say, and he was basically saying you have come to the point in your walk with God where you have defined freedom and Christian liberty with a beer in one hand, a cigar in the other hand, and a beard on your face. Basically he was calling them to a greater sensitivity. Yes, as Paul says, all things are lawful, but are all things profitable at all times? No, they're not. We want to understand what that freedom looks like.

My last observation and the biggest issue of all as we look at is this. What do we do with freedom that we have in Christ? We have freedom in Christ. We have liberty in Christ. That's the clear teaching that God has given us all things to enjoy. If the Scriptures don't explicitly speak to it, then we step into those matters of opinions (14:1) and we ask the Holy Spirit to give us a conviction about those things for ourselves. The driving question is okay, what am I going to do as a follower of Christ who wants to honor God? What am I going to do with this freedom? I think that's where we want to be. At this point we should be then asking the question what does the Bible say.

Let's look very briefly from a very high view. What does the Bible say about alcohol? Flying at 40,000 feet and not comprehensive, I just want to give you a flavor for what the Scriptures speak of in this regard. We'll deal with some other ones when we get into the matter of principles. But if you just took the Old Testament for example to see what it says. Deuteronomy 14:26. "And spend the money for whatever you desire, oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves." That's a verse that clearly speaks of God has created things to enjoy. Psalm 104:15. "And wine to gladden the heart of man; oil to make his face shine." A positive statement. I would say Proverbs 3:9-10. "Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the first fruits of all of your produce. Then your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will be bursting with wine." Again, God is speaking of blessing. He is speaking of things that they are to enjoy.

Right along with that, you have interestingly three groups of people in the Old Testament that were specifically warned or told not to participate. You have the Levites and God said Leviticus 10:9 when you're serving me in the temple or Tabernacle, do not participate in any alcohol beverages. Don't make that part of your daily experience. He speaks in Proverbs 31 and he warns kings that you should not be taking in and drinking alcohol. The Nazirites took a vow. God says when you take a vow as a Nazirite, for as long as you are living under that vow, you are not to imbibe in any alcohol at all. You have these interesting scenarios in which certain ones were told not to participate.

Then you come to the New Testament in John chapter 2. What was the very first miracle that Jesus performed? It wasn't the opening of the eyes of the blind man. It wasn't the healing of the lame. It wasn't in the casting out of the demon. It wasn't raising somebody from the dead. We know that Jesus was at a wedding feast where they ran out of wine. and Jesus stepped in and he turned all of these barrels of water to wine. In the word by the way, the word for wine is not a special word for grape juice as some people try to suggest. It's the same exact Greek word used in other passages in the New Testament to warn about drunkenness. So what Jesus did in that very first miracle is recorded for us was to change water to wine. In Luke chapter 7 verse 33-34, Jesus is accused falsely of participating with those were drunk and those who were the ill repute. When you read that passage it would be hard to read that and not think that Jesus

never participated. Now obviously he never crossed any line, but there's no reason to think that Jesus never drank wine during his life. Clearly there were those observations that were made about John the Baptist not drinking wine. They were comparing Jesus to John the Baptist saying he didn't so why do you? And so on one hand, it was obviously a false accusation. But on the other hand, it does perhaps speak to what Jesus participated in. Then finally 1 Corinthians 10, Romans 14, 1 Timothy chapter 4:3 and 5:23. Remember Paul writes to Timothy and says to take a little wine for your stomach. He wouldn't have told him that if there was a prohibition. All of this speaks of the theology of freedom with regard to our liberty in Christ. Our conscience is free to enjoy all the things that God has created and all the things he has made for us.

You take the whole of Scripture and you cannot turn to a verse in the Bible that says do not ever drink alcohol. You just can't. It's not there. I remember eons ago I taught something in a teaching setting and I made a statement similar to that. Our children were young at that time, and a concerned parent came up to me and said you'll never teach that when your children are teenagers. Well, I hope I would because that's what the Bible says. I don't have the liberty to change and adjust the message of God's word to fit my life circumstance or that of others. You can't point to a verse in the Bible that simply says never participate or don't ever partake in alcohol. It just doesn't exist.

If we are to have a theology of moderation, what would be some principles that could guide us in that regard? I'm glad you asked that because I have five of them for you this morning. Let's look at these. We'll just work our way through these. Some of this is again kind of a review from that 14<sup>th</sup> chapter. The first one is a review of what we've said to some extent. The principles that are to guide our convictions because I see this as a Romans 14 issue, falling into this matter of liberty. The first one is this. This is an area of freedom. This is an area of freedom. For some people in this area of freedom, the choice is going to be abstinence. If you choose abstinence, I believe the Bible would say and I believe God would say that's a good choice. If that's your conviction, that's your conscience before God, then that's a good choice. For some other people, I think there will be this matter of sacrifice. They will refrain and I think again God would say that's a good choice. That's a good thing. You're going to refrain from what you could enjoy.

My father-in-law, when he came to Christ later in life, was in many contexts, in many settings, conventions, and business settings in which there was a lot of drinking. He participated in social drinking up to the point of coming to Christ. When he came to Christ, I don't think anybody said it's a sin to drink alcohol, but his testimony, being what it was, he wanted to make a distinction and a difference in his life so he simply abstained when he was in those settings. He did not participate. He wanted people to understand that there were things that he had chosen as a follower of Christ in this regard. So that's a perfectly legitimate response.

The last one. The choice will for some will be moderation and again it is a good choice in the sight of the Lord. None of these positions is more holy than another. Certainly none of them is more sinful than another. This is a choice and a matter of conscience that the Holy Spirit will lead and guide each of us to the place that he wants us to be.

The second principle is this. No one can impose stricter standards than Scripture commands on another believer. We talked about this in Romans 14. We're getting very close to being legalistic. In fact, we are being legalistic when we say my rules are your rules. The way I live my life is the way you're required to live your life. It's called legalism. When I say to you the way I live my life is better than the way you live your life, that's legalism. We can't do that. We can't impose on other people standards of conduct that the Scripture doesn't require and that we have for ourselves in terms of our own personal conviction. That has been repeatedly Paul's point in Romans. Chapter 14 verses 3 and 4, verse 10, verse 13. What did he say? Don't judge each other. Somebody has a different opinion. You don't despise them for it. Verse 10 through 12. Don't forget that we're all going to stand before the judgment seat of Christ. We're all giving an accounting for our life and then he ended up by saying don't cause other people to stumble. Don't put a stumbling block in front of somebody else. So we can't impose a stricter standard on people than the Scriptures do.

Third principle. If a believer is in a situation in which the exercise of his or her liberty might cause another to stumble then, they must refrain. I honestly think this is the one at which point we probably need the greater attention. I think we understand the matter of freedom. We understand the matter of liberty. But what I don't always see by



way of application in people's lives is their willingness to sacrifice or to refrain in the face of all the things that Paul has said in Romans 14 about not causing harm, not causing another to stumble. He said don't destroy the work that God is doing by way of sanctification in another believer's life. that's the sensitivity that is called upon. When Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:12 everything is lawful, he means it. But he follows right up with but not everything is profitable. What does he mean by that? You may cause a brother or sister who's weaker in the faith to stumble and to fall. Knowing that we have a freedom and yet denying it is a good thing. That is commended. That's exercising the spirit of love towards other believers. If we're in a public setting and there is the possibility, which are almost always going to be, that there are believers there who are weak in the faith. I think the application again that Paul is making at that point is make the sacrifice. Romans 14:17. The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking. You don't elevate your liberty to eat and drink the way you want to in private. Don't bring those convictions into a public setting where you could harm a brother or sister in Christ. That's the love that we're to show to each other. Don't disregard. Don't despise. He says don't flaunt the liberty that you have.

Number four. This much is clear. Nobody who wants to honor the word of God, nobody disagrees with this. This much is clear. Drunkenness is sinful and alcohol is addictive. All of our understandings about alcohol are to be understood through this – that the Scriptures consistently say that when you cross over and you move from liberty that you have in Christ and freedom that you have in Christ and you cross that line into intoxication or drunkenness, it is sin. In every instance, in every case it is a violation of God's will and desire and plan for you. that's why when you read in Proverbs chapter 20 and verse 1 he says, "Wine is a mocker; strong drink a brawler and whoever is led astray by it is not wise." Or in Isaiah chapter 5 verse 11, "Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them." Ephesians 5:18 Paul says don't be drunk with wine. That is excess. Be filled with the Spirit. Romans 13:13 he lists all kinds of behaviors that are not to be a part of a believer's life. one of them is drunkenness. Galatians 5. It's the same thing.

Why do you suppose that in the midst of the list that the Holy Spirit gives to the writers of Scripture to say to us this is the kind of behavior that is the pattern of the

world and is not part of the believers experience, why do you suppose that in almost all of those lists there is the word drunkenness? Because in the eyes of God what he has given as a gift to enjoy becomes literally sin and dishonoring to God when we step across that line. That has to be of course decided and determined by each person.

There are many warnings in Scripture about the dangers of alcohol. I mean there's heartbreaking stories in the Bible about those people who went way beyond just enjoying what God had provided. In the book of Genesis, you think of Lot and the tragedy of the way he ended his life. you think on Noah. This righteous, great man of God who trusted God in one of the greatest examples of Scripture in going through the flood. He comes out on the other side and he stumbles and falls into this matter of drunkenness. It really brings a great blot on his life. Clearly there are many examples that tell us that alcohol is powerful. It's addictive. It's deceptive. It is worthy of our understanding the warnings the Scriptures give to us.

Just listen. These are just some current statistics that I pulled up this week that speak to this very matter of the abuse of alcohol in America. Honestly, if we hadn't said any of this other stuff, in some respects for me I just look at this and I go is this really a path that I want to consider going down? 70% of all Americans say they drink. 30% say that they drink excessively at times. There are 15 million who suffer from abuse and addiction. 54% of young people said they drink. 34% of young people said they binge drink at least once a month. 13% of all deaths aged 20 to 39 are alcohol-related. It is estimated the US economy suffers a \$250 billion annual loss due to alcohol-related issues. The list goes on and on and on. What does that say to us? One of the things it says is we are a people of excess. We're a people who are drawn to excess. It says that there's something powerful about alcohol. There's something deceptive about it. People don't just sit down and plan to ruin their life. But they're drawn in at times into these things that they never intended.

The last principle is simply this. All Christians are subject to the laws of the land. The reality of that principle is simply to say as Christians we're subject to God's laws and the things that he has said, but we're also subject to the laws of God through government as we saw in Romans 13. Underage drinking is not just illegal in the eyes of God. It's sin. Intoxication, public drunkenness is not just illegal in the eyes of God, it's

sin. These are things that the Scriptures declare and things that we can see very clearly in our culture. I think if you ask any law enforcement person in our church dealing with the things that they deal with day-to-day, they could tell you heartbreaking stories, not only of harm, death, family destruction personal behavior that is related to the abuse and misuse of alcohol.

Again, right where we started. We must never allow the conscience of others to determine our conscience. That's not what God calls from us. We must always consider the conscience of others when we determine our own actions.

What do we take away? Regardless of where we are in any of these positions that we laid out in these three, our main desire as a Christ follower must always be to do all things for the glory of God. Every day we live our life with that in mind. That's the high calling that God has placed on our life. We make choices every day. Those choices every day, every one of those choices is to be made in the light of who we are as followers of Christ. Every one of those choices is to be made with the understanding that whatever we do, whether we eat or drink, Paul says, is made to the glory of God. It's reflective in those choices that we make. We want to live out this gospel. This gospel that has come to us and changed the trajectory of our life, changed literally our eternal destiny.

This gospel that says yes, I am a sinner. I need to be saved by grace. This gospel that says Jesus has come and he has provided the way for that to happen through his death on the cross. He has paid the penalty for sins. Wherever I find myself, whether I find myself in some addictive behavior that is bringing great difficulty and pain and destruction in my life, or whether I'm in my own eyes a good person – whichever of those and all in between, every one of us needs the same Savior. Every one of us needs the same gospel. Every one of us needs the same grace and the same mercy. The good news is that God has made this available to everyone of us. If you are here this morning and you do not know what it means to have Jesus as your Savior, to have your sins forgiven, to know that your eternal destiny is that you're going to live forever with God in heaven, then the invitation that we extend to you is to put your faith and trust in Christ alone this morning right where you're sitting. Just agree with God. That's

all it calls for. I agree with God about what he has said about me that I can't do it on my own. I need his Son. Jesus provided a way and I believe it's enough.

Let's pray. Father God, thank you for your word. Thank you for how it is that you speak into every area of our life. Lord, thank you that every area of our life can in fact be lived in such a way that we can do all things for the glory of God. We want to do that, Father. We want to lift up your name. We want to bring glory to your name. We want to represent you well in this lost and dying world. May the distinctiveness of our life and the testimony of the gospel be such that it points always to this glory and grace that we have found in Christ. We pray in Jesus's name, amen.