Counselor's Toolbox

To the Scrupulous: Romans 14:23 Doesn't Mean What You Think It Means

by **MICHAEL R. EMLET**

In the movie *The Princess Bride*, the villain Vizzini makes the remark, "Inconceivable!" multiple times to express his astonishment at his plans having gone awry. At a certain point, one of his henchmen, Inigo Montoya, says, "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means." It's become one of the iconic lines of this cult classic film.

Surprisingly, this might apply in our counseling! As we have opportunity to minister the Word of God to counselees, sometimes we need to correct their faulty understanding of certain Bible passages, which they have misappropriated in relation to their struggle. In essence, we say, "You keep using that verse. I do not think it means what you think it means."

The struggle we will address in this article is scrupulosity, often described as "religious OCD."[1] I talk with many Christians who experience

1. For an overview of scrupulosity, see Michael R. Emlet, "Scrupulosity: When Doubts Devour," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 33:3 (2019): 11–40.

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this, and it's heartbreaking to hear how it robs them of their peace with God. This is because a person with scrupulosity struggles with intrusive thoughts about their spiritual lives, which cause them anxiety and lead them on a quest for certainty, reassurance, and resolution of their doubt. The presence of doubt, which we all experience to some degree, is amplified in their struggle and proves to be a heavy weight to carry.

We will use the example of the struggle experienced by Isaac.[2] Isaac is a member in good standing at his local church, but he often abstains from taking the Lord's Supper when he is plagued with the thought, "How do you know for sure you're a Christian?" To proceed in the face of his doubts seems like taking the Supper in an "unworthy manner" (1 Cor 11:27). In his anxiety, he remains glued to his seat as other congregants go forward to receive the bread and the wine.

One passage that provokes fear and anxiety for Isaac and other scrupulous people is 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.

The second part of the verse is particularly anxiety-producing for the scrupulous person. For them, doubt means a lack of faith. Therefore, based on the principle "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin," they consider doubt itself sinful. In their interpretation, Paul's words mean, "whatever *involves doubt* is sin." Any doubt—at all—becomes a whirlpool that threatens to suck the scrupulous person down into condemnation.

An important step of ministry is to help the scrupulous person understand what the verse is saying and not saying. This is similar to helping a person understand the nature of the unpardonable sin when they repeatedly fear they have committed it though they have not.[3] It's often true that a person with scrupulosity will have accurate biblical-theological knowledge about the issue they are obsessing about but still struggle with irrational thoughts and anxiety. They will say, "I know what this passage says, but I still have this thought, and I'm overcome

2. "Isaac" is a composite of many people I have counseled over the years.

3. There are many misconceptions regarding the unpardonable sin, sometimes referred to as blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (see Matt 12:22–32).

with anxiety. The anxiety is speaking louder than what I know to be true." Accordingly, simply having an accurate understanding of a passage does not guarantee freedom for a scrupulous person. But a good starting point is to clear up misconceptions and questions regarding the interpretation of a given passage so that you can appeal to a foundation of truth you both ultimately agree on.

This article will interpret Romans 14:23 within its broader context, Romans 14:1–15:13, particularly focusing on chapter 14.[4] I will then discuss how a proper understanding of this passage guards against its misappropriation by a scrupulous counselee and how a biblical counselor might wisely help a counselee press against their doubts without violating their conscience.

What This Verse Means and Doesn't Mean

Dealing with the statement "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" is challenging, even for someone who does not experience scrupulosity. It is easy to pull the verse out of context and make assumptions about what Paul means. So first, let's look at what he *did* mean by placing this verse in a broader interpretive context, and then second, we will discuss what he did *not* mean.

Understanding what Romans 14:23 means in its context. Romans 14 falls on the heels of Paul's exhortation to love in the preceding chapter (13:8–10). Then in chapter 14, Paul instructs the Roman church how the command to love one another is applied to two groups within the body. These groups have differing convictions regarding the practice of their faith. Paul explicitly identifies one group as those who are "weak" in matters of faith (14:1–2) and labels the other group as "strong" (15:1).

Many scholars believe that those identified as weak in faith were Jewish Christians who made up a minority of the largely Gentile church in Rome. These Jewish Christians thought that they remained bound to keep certain Mosaic laws. They had not yet grasped the truth that faith in Christ freed them from ritual law-keeping.

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4. Douglas Moo views the larger context as 14:1–15:13 and calls it "A Plea for Unity," noting the repeated word *receive* (ESV *welcome*), which occurs in 14:1 and 15:7. See Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 2018), 843.

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