

**SUBTLE SINS**  
Romans 14:6-23  
By Raymond White

When God forbids a thing and you do that thing, that's a sin, of course. But there are other things that God has not forbidden and which are not inherently sin but which become sin because of the circumstances. These are, what I call, subtle sins. Here's a short list.

**[1] SIN BY ASSOCIATION**

*1 Timothy 5:22 Neither be partaker of other men's sin.*

*Romans 1:32 Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.*

This could be as simple as introducing two people who have immoral intentions or giving a phone number of an abortion clinic to a pregnant girl. If a friend of yours says that he is having problems with his live-in girlfriend and could you advise him on how he can get along better with her, the advise you should give him is get married tonight or move out tonight, but don't spend one more night living in sin. Of course he won't take your advise but there is no other advise that you can give without making yourself an accomplice in another man's sin. It is okay to give advice, but not advice on how to sin. There is no right way to do a wrong thing.

**[2] SIN BY APPEARANCE**

*1 Thessalonians 5:22 Abstain from all appearance of evil.*

Not only don't sin, but don't even look like you're sinning. Don't play with the fringes. There are some things that are innocent in and of themselves but which defile us just the same. It may be as simple as a married man whose wife has stayed home from church today sitting in a church pew next to a married woman whose husband has stayed home from church today. And it is probably perfectly innocent but it looks bad and makes people nervous. Don't do that. If you're having trouble in your marriage, ladies, don't seek advice from some "helpful" man. And men, don't seek advice from a women. Again, it may be innocent, but is it really?

An instructive example of edgy things is Paul teaching Christians how to deal with meat sacrificed to idols.

*Romans 14:6 He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.*

The point here is that it really doesn't matter which you do.

Here's the situation. A Roman pagan sacrifices an animal, maybe a goat, to Zeus and pays the pagan priest with some of the meat. That priest sells that meat to the local butcher shop. Now you, a Roman Christian, wander into that shop and buy some meat for dinner. On the way out, a fellow Christian intercepts you and says, "Just so you know, that meat was sacrifice to

idols.” So, now what do you do? Is that meat somehow tainted because it was sacrificed to an idol? That’s the question that Paul deals with here.

Is this question even relevant today? Specifically, no. But generally, yes. Specifically, no one sacrifices to idols today. I suppose you could imagine a vacation in Haiti and eating chicken in a hotel and learning that the chicken had been sacrificed in a voodoo ritual then sold to a market then to the hotel where it ended up on your plate. Paul’s point is: so what? The “so what” needs a bit of clarification. Paul says if you eat it, that’s fine, and if you choose not to eat it, that’s fine to. Is there any possibility of sin attached to eating that chicken in Haiti or goat in ancient Rome? Answer: maybe. Let’s continue.

***Romans 14:20*** *For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offense.*

That sacrificed goat is pure, not tainted by its pagan sacrifice. Go ahead, enjoy your meal. But then what could “eating with offense” possibly mean, that would make sinless meat a sin?

***Romans 14:21*** *It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.*

There are two things that might make that meat sinful: (1) it violates your conscience, or (2) it violates someone else’s conscience.

Imagine a pagan who becomes a Christian. That conversion experience might have been traumatic for him and he might be looking back at his life with idols with great distain. And now a plate of goat meat is set before him and he knows it’s been sacrificed to idols. He might very well say, “Sorry, but I can’t eat that.” Now imagine that you, a liberated Christian who doesn’t care one way or another for that silly pagan sacrifice, are at dinner with him. Should you eat it or not? Probably not. Not because there’s anything wrong with the meat, but because it might make “thy brother stumbleth.” There is no sin in that meat. There is sin in offending your brother.

As far as your own conscience is concerned —

***Romans 14:22*** *Hast thou faith? Have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth.*

In other words, don’t worry about the meat. If your faith and your conscience are clear, eat and enjoy. It’s nothing to worry about. But —

***Romans 14:23*** *And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not in faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.*

The question then is: But isn’t that ex-pagan Christian being overly superstitious, afraid of a little meat? The answer is yes. And shouldn’t he just get over it and not burden his fellow Christians with his reluctance? The answer to that is: if his conscience says don’t eat it, he really shouldn’t eat it. Violating his own conscience does have a damning effect and he really should leave it be until his faith grows to the point where he understands the silliness of it. And you, out of courtesy if nothing else, should accommodate that.

Now, is there a general principle here? Beyond meat sacrificed to idols, are there other issues that make Christians stumble? There are whole bunches of just such things — things that have little to do with sin per se but can be sinful because of how they affect these Christians and not those Christians.

### [3] GREY AREAS

Baptists don't dance. Mormons don't drink. Catholics do both, but nobody defends unborn babies more gallantly than Catholics so my hat is off to them. Adventists worship on Saturday. Jehovah's Witnesses pretty much scorn everybody.

Do Christians have anything in common? Yes: their love for Jesus and a determination to submit to Christian principles, whatever their varied consciences think them to be. What about dress length? What about tattoos? What about such a simple thing as wearing a tie to church? Is it a sin for a man to not wear a tie to church? What about selling whiskey if you're a checkout girl at a supermarket? What if you're an accountant for a gambling casino in Las Vegas? Is that too close to the "sin" of gambling that's goes on there or are you at safe enough distance from it?

There are so many gray areas, ordinary things, non-sins, that have the potential of becoming sins, subtle sins, that one might think Christians might be afraid to do anything at all, to just be afraid of life for fear each tiny mistake.

Jesus described such fears of the minutiae best —

*Matthew 23:24* *Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.*

Such fine tuning of the law makes us terrified to live because we can't do anything without making a mistake. And so Christ gives us liberty and frees us from such silliness.

But then we create an opposite silliness which is this: "I'm enjoying my Christian liberty, and you're all tangled up with a bunch of rules, so you're the disobedient one, not me. I'm freed by grace to do what I want."

And so on the one hand, we judge fellow Christians because they do things we wouldn't do, and on the other hand we judge fellow Christians because they won't do things that our consciences allow us to do. Go figure.

Do you see that it's all nonsense? And thank God that Paul, in this text is showing us that it's all nonsense. Christians have been burnt at the stake by other Christians for just such things, and Paul is here saying, it doesn't matter! Aside from the express commandments, God's written list of dos and don'ts, let your conscience tell you what to do. Do you want to eat that steak which came from a cow, or pig, or goat that's been sacrificed to an idol? Go ahead. Eat, enjoy. There is no sin. Unless your conscience is tweaked by it, in that case, it is sin so leave it alone. Do not offend your own conscience.

And beyond offending your own conscience, there's the matter of offending other people's consciences. For example: there is a reason for modest dress. Why in the world would you want to use "Christian liberty" as an excuse to make someone else stumble? "But I have a right..." Maybe you do. But you don't have a right to offend. Your skirt length, your hair, your jewelry, your whatever, may all be quite innocent in themselves, but they can all become sinful in how they effect and "offend" other people. The right admonition is just as Paul says —

**Romans 14:20** ...All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man [to do whatever, fill in the blank] with offense.

There. That's a rule we can and should all live by. Really try to not offend.

#### [4] CONCLUSION

**Romans 14:3** Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him that eateth not judge him that eateth, for God hath received him.

This, I suppose makes the opposite point: Don't be so easily offended.

Here's a great saying although I don't know who said it: "A fool takes offense when none was intended." (Similar words are credited to Emerson, Brigham Young, and Confucius.) Some people enjoy being offended so much that they go out of their way to be offended. Don't be one of those. To be easily offended by trivial things is to deny that there are truly serious things that should offend us; like for instance killing unborn babies. Some people are fine with killing unborn babies but object to tattoos. Now *that* hypocrisy is sin.

Seeing the issue from both sides as Paul does, hopefully, somewhere in the middle we Christians must meet and tolerate each other, without (sigh) offense.

So how do you know if something really is a sin or not? There are two rules. *First:* When God specifically forbids something, that something is a sin. *Second:* Whatever injures innocent people (not guilty people, law purposely injures guilty people) is a sin. Jesus sums it up neatly —

**Matthew 22:37** Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. **:38** This is the first and great commandment. **:39** And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. **:40** On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

What else do you need to know? Not much. If you're violating God or harming people, that's sin. Everything else is pretty much not. And if you're so worried that you might accidentally sin, do remember that there's grace.