

Life Group Questions

May 26th, 2024

Do Not Cause to Stumble – Pastor Bryan Born – [Romans 14:13-23](#)

Note from Pastor Jonathan

I know our groups have people who are struggling. We want to help, but often don't know how. On May 18, we hosted Dr. Josh Kruse to share a workshop called **"You Can Counsel"**. It was a fantastic talk with grounded theology and practical techniques. I put my notes here: <https://willingdon.org/app/uploads/2024/05/You-Can-Counsel-Jonathan-Hsieh.pdf>. I hope it can be a refresher for people who attended the talk and give the people who missed out an idea.

We will be having our monthly **Food Drive** next Sunday (June 2). Check out a list of suggested items you can bring: <https://willingdon.org/events/food-drive/>.

The Men's Fellowship will have a **Real Men BBQ** on June 8, check out the page for more details: <https://willingdon.org/events/mens-summer-event-real-men-bbq/>.

Kids Min always needs volunteers for their summer **Elementary Summer Daycamp** (<https://willingdon.org/events/elementary-summer-daycamp-2024/>). This could be a great opportunity for your Life Group to volunteer together. Stop by the HQ downstairs on Sunday to ask for more details.

A reminder: please send me summer activity ideas to share with the Life Groups. These could be primarily for socializing, serving, or a combination of the two.

Pastor Jonathan Hsieh
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OPENING QUESTIONS (Pick Any You Like)

1. Have you ever stopped doing something for someone else's sake?

I used to explore abandoned places, like a prison farm or factory. I took these three photos at an abandoned elementary school in Atlanta. Once, I



went to a train depot and stumbled upon "Terminus" while they filmed *The Walking Dead*! Norman Reedus (Daryl) waved at me.

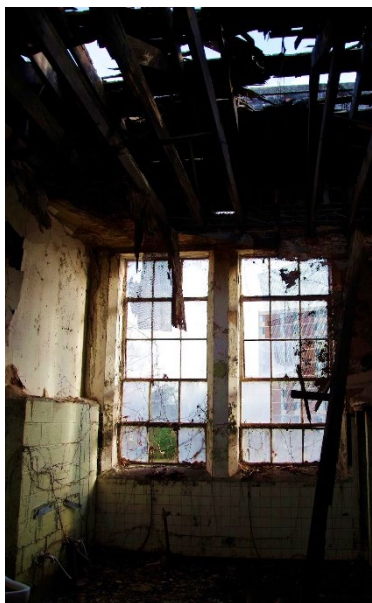


I loved the excitement since I never knew what to expect. I loved taking surreal and spooky photos, basking in eerie silence, and feeling the

adrenaline rush from hearing a stranger's steps from the darkness.

My dad saw my photos on Facebook and told me to stop. I said I was safe. I covered up, brought a flashlight, and wore boots, a mask, and gloves. I always tested the floors because some places were rotten. I kept a mental map of exits and moved quietly, listening. I only hide once.

Some of my youth boys (for some reason none of the girls) would ask if they could tag along. I always said no. What made me stop was when my dad said they might be inspired to go explore on their own. I knew these boys would **not** watch where they're stepping or be alert to danger or take precautions. If they got hurt or in trouble, I'd be to blame. So, I quit for their sake. Sometimes I still miss it!



Romans 14:13–23

¹³ Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

¹⁴ I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵ For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.

¹⁶ So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

²⁰ Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. ²¹ It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.

²² The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. 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.

2. Are there limits to personal freedom? If so, where are they and why?

Living in Canada, we have a lot more freedoms than much of the rest of the world. Many in our church come from very restrictive countries and can tell you how good we have it here. Even so, we can't do *anything* we want. I'm free to drive on any public road, but can't trespass on private ones. I can worship whatever deity or non-deity I want, but can't force others to do the same. I can work different jobs, but many require certification or licensing. I can't just perform a medical operation or drive a semi-truck on a whim.

So where are the limits and why are they there?

3. How do badly behaving Christians affect how other Christians or non-Christians view Christianity?

Sadly, there have been lots of terrible representations of Christianity. Pastors and church leaders often appear on the news almost always for doing something terrible. They may give people the impression that Christianity is just a scam or run by abusers.

Self-attributed Christian nations or political parties often behave hypocritically, picking and choosing what biblical ideas to integrate into their policies. They may say they promote "traditional" marriage but have leaders caught having affairs, rail against "liberal" ideas while neglecting love, or flip-flop on their platforms based on whatever is gets them votes. They may give people the impression that Christianity is just a tool for power.

Churches can be places of personal fulfillment. Our prayers are often just for our own benefit or for the people in our own circles. We want programs that match our needs and fit my style. If the church doesn't do what we want, then we'll go find another that will. Besides, I pay the pastor's salary! I should have a say! This self-centered Christianity leads non-Christians to think that Christianity is all about selfishness. Someone on the r/exchristian subreddit shared about their experience on a mission trip that achieved nothing (Language Warning: https://reddit.com/r/exchristian/comments/575q9h/how_a_missions_trip_caused_me_to_lose_faith/). Many commenters chimed in about their similar experiences and how Christianity is awful for its selfishness.

LET'S DIG IN

4. Why should we make sacrifices to protect other Christians?

There's a play on words here. Paul uses the same word κρίνω (krino) twice. We shouldn't pass judgment on others, meaning we shouldn't **make others change** what they believe or do (assuming it doesn't violate any biblical principles and follows what we discussed last week). But Paul tells us to take it a step further. We should judge/decide to **change ourselves** for the sake of others. Love goes out of its way to protect others.

What are we protecting them from? Paul uses two expressions here. Stumbling block is πρόσκομμα (proskomma), meaning "opportunity to ... make a misstep, cause for offense, cause for making a misstep" (BDAG). Hindrance is σκάνδαλον (skandalon, where we get scandalize), meaning "an action or circumstance that leads one to act contrary to a proper course of action or set of beliefs, temptation to sin, enticement" (BDAG).

God often uses the image of walking to depict life. (Check out WALKING in the NOTES.) Imagine living the Christian life as hiking a trail through a forest. Sometimes the trail splits. Some paths say "JESUS THIS WAY" and others don't. Going down the wrong path could lead someone away from God. Sometimes there are forks with a few options that all say "JESUS THIS WAY". These are different ways to follow Jesus, like eating or abstaining from meat (Romans 14:11-2). Either one will still get you going in the right direction.

Paul tells us, "Don't make someone trip on the trail or lead them to choose the wrong path!" Jesus takes this stuff seriously.

Matthew 18:5-7 – "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!"

The Greek word for "to sin" here is the same verb Paul used for hindrance. Jesus says Christians will face temptation to leave the path, but He has strong words for the people that tempt. Since other Christians belong to Jesus (Romans 14:4) and are our family (Romans 14:10), we should care about what happens to them.

5. How can we protect others from stumbling?

The example Paul gives is categorizing things as clean or unclean. Check out CLEAN OR UNCLEAR in the NOTES for some context.

The goal of God's kingdom isn't about eating and drinking. Jesus didn't die on the cross so we could indulge whatever we wanted. He died on the cross to take on our punishment for our sins so that we could be forgiven and have a relationship with God. He gives us His righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. That means we should ask ...

Does it lead to RIGHTEOUSNESS? God is righteous, meaning He always does what is right, proper, and good. Because He's righteous, He must punish the unrighteous. Unfortunately for us, we're all guilty of being unrighteous, doing what's wrong, inappropriate, and evil.

When I applied to be a Permanent Resident in Canada, I sent my fingerprints to the FBI in the States for a criminal background report. The FBI told the IRCC that, as far as they knew, Jonathan Hsieh didn't commit any crimes that would make him unwelcome in Canada. Good thing the FBI didn't track my fashion crimes.

When we want to enter God's kingdom, God checks our criminal record. He sees that we've broken His laws so we are barred from entry. We've acted selfishly, hurt people with our words, or prioritized other things above

God. To address that, Jesus came to live a perfectly righteous life. He always did what was right and good. As an innocent person, He added our criminal record to His file and received the punishment we deserved. If we recognize we're unrighteous and confess our sins, Jesus forgives us and wipes our criminal record clean (1 John 1:9). In return, Jesus gives us His righteous, clean record (2 Corinthians 5:21). When God sees our application to be a citizen of His kingdom, He sees a clean record without any crimes.

In the past, we may have structured our lives around enjoying food, drinks, hobbies, and more, but now we structure our lives around how to live as citizens of God's kingdom. We also consider whether our actions lead others to live righteously or not.

Here's an example of how this applies. I love fantasy and action, so Game of Thrones should be right up my alley. Unfortunately, I heard there's an abundance of graphic sex and nudity. I know seeing that would trigger my lust, so I decided against watching it. Years ago I started watching Orange is the New Black when everyone was raving about it. The story seemed interesting (Captain Janeway in prison!), but there were way too many naked women on screen so I stopped after the first episode. Others may be able to watch these shows without being affected, but I know I can't. But what if a younger Christian sees our excitement for one of these shows and watches it? Would it affect their ability to live righteously or would it tempt them to sin?

Most popular songs are about shallow relationships, treating women like objects, sex, drugs, alcohol, or violence. We may listen to enjoy it on a musically deeper level or to dissect the message. Or we ignore the message and vibe with the music. Or maybe we appreciate the main message, but there are some questionable lyrics. There's a rapper with a sound I enjoy who raps a lot about being faithful to his wife, but he also threatens to shoot people. I'm sure many of us have songs or artists we're conflicted about. What if we're giving a "weaker" Christian a ride while jamming out to one of those songs? Would they get the wrong idea of what's acceptable behavior for a Christian?

Does it disturb the PEACE? Sin destroys peace. Imagine you have a friend who is an RCMP officer. If you do some crimes in front of her, your relationship is probably not going to be peaceful. She has to do her part to bring you to justice, so instead of happily hanging out, you avoid her. Your relationship got weird.

When we break God's laws, we sever our relationship with God. We become his enemies. We may feel guilty for our sins so we avoid God. But when Jesus forgave us, He reconciled us to Himself (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). Instead of being enemies, God makes us His children (John 1:12). Now we have peace with God and He even becomes our source of peace in times of trouble. Many of our sins also hurt our peace with others, but Jesus gives us the ministry of reconciliation where we can bring peace to others.

Our actions can disturb that peace. For example, there's no direct biblical command against smoking (but there are other indirect reasons against it: <https://www.gotquestions.org/smoking-Christian-sin.html> and <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/secondhand-smoke/index.html>). Are we willing to abstain from smoking while being with other Christians who are bothered by it? It's fine to drink alcohol responsibly, but are we willing to hold off on ordering a beer if we go out to eat with someone struggling with sobriety? Or do we prioritize our preferences over peace? Is maintaining a peaceful relationship more important than our individual desires?

Does it produce JOY IN THE HOLY SPIRIT? Statistics show that people feel less hopeful about the future (<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220517/dq220517d-eng.htm>). Wars, inflation, depressed wages, impossible housing costs, unrealistic beauty standards, loneliness, you name it. The world's always been a rough place, but the Internet makes us so much more aware of it all.

We're all out here looking for joy and Life Groups are a great way to experience it! We can find joy when we get together for a meal, play board games, or hang out as a group at the park. I know so many people suffered

during the pandemic when we couldn't get together. But let me ask you, is the main joy your group experiences centered around activities or experiencing God?

Of course, it's not a binary option: joy in God OR joy in activities. But is the Holy Spirit somehow part of that joy? For example, when we catch up, does God receive credit for what He's been doing or are we sharing just happy random events? When we hang out, are we asking God how we can love and minister to each other or are we just interested in having fun? When we discuss the sermon, are we sharing what the Holy Spirit is doing to make us more like Jesus or just some knowledge nuggets? When we think about the highlights of the past year, are we thinking about how we're partnering with the Holy Spirit to build God's kingdom? If not, we may teach younger Christians that the joy of Life Groups, church, or following Jesus is found in socializing, fun activities, or an academic study of the Bible.

Am I considering how I can BUILD UP OTHERS?

Jesus said that He would build His church (Matthew 16:18). Hooray! Do you know how Jesus will build His church? By equipping us to do the building (Ephesians 4:11-13)! We all have unique gifts and a part to play (1 Corinthians 12). Although we are free, let's use our freedom to utilize our gifts to build people up (1 Corinthians 10:23-24).

We can follow Jesus and Paul's examples. Although Jesus was all-powerful and could do whatever He wanted, He gave up His life to sacrificially serve us (Philippians 2:4-8). Paul was one of Jesus' uniquely selected leaders, but he didn't use his privilege and power for his own benefit. Instead, Paul went out of his way to accommodate whomever he was serving (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Let's ask if our behavior and speech build up other believers. I think this provides a positive spin. Instead of spending all our efforts worrying if our actions harm, we can try to think of ways to build others up. By focusing on building up there's less room for harmful things. And since our mindset becomes set on doing good for others, the bad stuff naturally loses allure.

So how can you work to build others in your family, Life Group, or church?

6. How can we draw healthy boundaries?

We can't please everyone! In Jesus' time, people accused John the Baptist of being demon-possessed because he had a strict diet and lived outside of society. The same people accused Jesus of being a drunk evil dude because he socialized and ate with people (Matthew 11:16-19).

We also can't please people with competing views. You'll always be too modern or too traditional, too much like the world or too out of touch, too spiritual or too earthly. Sometimes when I try to adapt myself to everyone, I legitimately forget who I am. How does Jonathan *really* talk or what is he *really* like? Do I act this way because that's who I am or do I do it because I'm just trying to fit in with other people?

Also, not everyone will interpret everything the same way. Every now and then, Pastor Vinh tells me about someone sharing a complaint about his sermon. It's often because they interpreted part of his message in a way Vinh didn't intend. The other three thousand people who heard the sermon didn't take it that way, either, but this person did. We can do our best, but someone will always take it the wrong way.

So how can we not let this drag us down?

NOTES

KEY WORDS AND PHRASES

I love to color-mark these kinds of passages to highlight key words or ideas that stand out to me.

Romans 14:13–23 ¹³ Therefore let us not **pass judgment** on one another any longer, but rather **decide** never to put a **stumbling block** or **hindrance** in the way of a **brother**. ¹⁴ I know and am persuaded in the **Lord Jesus** that nothing is **unclean** in itself, but it is **unclean** for anyone who thinks it **unclean**. ¹⁵ For if your **brother** is grieved by what you **eat**, you are no longer walking in love. By what you **eat**, do not **destroy** the one for whom **Christ** died. ¹⁶ So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of **God** is not a matter of **eating** and **drinking** but of righteousness and peace and joy in the **Holy Spirit**. ¹⁸ Whoever thus serves **Christ** is acceptable to **God** and approved by men. ¹⁹ So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

²⁰ Do not, for the sake of **food**, destroy the work of **God**. Everything is indeed **clean**, but it is wrong for anyone to make another **stumble** by what he **eats**. ²¹ It is good not to **eat meat** or **drink wine** or do anything that causes your **brother** to **stumble**. ²² The **faith** that you have, keep between yourself and **God**. Blessed is the one who has no reason to **pass judgment** on himself for what he approves. 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.

WALKING

God uses the image of walking a journey to describe living life. It's all over the Bible.

Enoch was depicted as a righteous man who “walked with God” (Genesis 5:24). God commanded the Israelites to love God “by walking in his ways” (Deuteronomy 30:16). The psalmist asks God to keep them away from “false ways” because they’ve “chosen the way of faithfulness” (Psalm 119:29-30). The Book of Proverbs guides us to walk in “paths of uprightness” (Proverbs 4:11) and warns us not to “enter the path of the wicked” or “walk in the way of the evil” (Proverbs 4:14). Micah prophesies of a time when “all the peoples walk each in the name of its god”, but God’s people “walk in the name of the Lord” (Micah 4:5).

It's reflected in the New Testament as well. Jesus tells the crowd that He is the light of the world and whoever follows Him “will not walk in darkness” (John 8:12). John tells us that whoever abides in Jesus should “walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:6). Paul continues this image and describes his own life of following Jesus as running a race (2 Timothy 4:7).

Dallas Willard said we're all being spiritually formed. Muslims, Hindus, atheists, agnostics, and people who are Christian in name only are all being formed. We're always walking toward a destination. The question is where are we going? It's important to note that there's never a neutral position or staying still. The two options are to be shaped by the world or be transformed by God (Romans 12:2). So are we walking towards God or something else?

CLEAN OR UNCLEAR

Well over a thousand years earlier, God gave His people lots of laws. One reason for these laws was to make them stand out from among their neighbors who followed other gods. One distinction was what they ate.

Leviticus 20:25–26 – You shall therefore separate the **clean** beast from the **unclean**, and the **unclean** bird from the **clean**. You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground

crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.

Jesus eventually came to fulfill the law and explain the spirit behind the original law.

Mark 7:14b, 18b-23 – ... “Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but **the things that come out of a person are what defile him.**” ... Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “**What comes out of a person is what defiles him.** For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. **All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.**”

Jesus taught that it's not the food you eat that makes you clean or unclean. It's the heart behind it. We discussed the motivation behind actions last week. The Israelites had often focused on the visible part of the law but neglected the inward attitude, leading to hypocrisy.

It wasn't easy for early Jewish Christians to learn that all people and animals are clean. Peter needed a vision from God (Acts 10:9-23) and later still stumbled (Galatians 2:11-14).