

CHRISTIAN LIBERTY LIMITED BY A CONCERN FOR OTHERS

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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This morning we begin a series of six messages I have entitled, “The Limits of Christian Liberty” from 1 Corinthians 8-10. In these chapters, Paul addresses the second of the questions that the Corinthians had raised in an earlier letter. Having dealt with the question of marriage and singleness in chapter 7, Paul now turns to the issue of the Christian’s freedom, particularly as it relates to those “gray areas” in Scripture, those areas of morality that are not addressed straightforwardly in the Word.

In these chapters, Paul addresses the specific practice of eating meat offered to idols. While this may not be of great concern for us in our culture, the advice Paul gives serves as an important principle for us to live by because we do have cultural issues to which Scripture speaks little or is completely silent. These issues have served as fodder for battles in evangelical life since the beginning of evangelical life. Issues like the consumption of alcohol, use of tobacco products, styles of music, dancing, billiards, card playing, bowling, going to the movies, watching television, wearing make-up, males with earrings, tankinis, etc. While some of these things are certainly important issues, we are unable to speak to them as authoritatively as those issues that Scripture plainly forbids, such as murder, adultery, stealing, lying, coveting, etc.

Throughout church history, there have been two extremes followed in regard to these gray areas. The first extreme is that of *legalism*. Legalism sees every act in black and white. Every action is either right or wrong. Everything is good or bad whether the Scripture mentions it or not. Legalism exceeds what is written in Scripture, developing a list of rules that are outside of Scripture while claiming to stand on the Word of God. True spirituality is reduced to keeping a list of do’s and don’ts. The Pharisees are the greatest example of this in Scripture. They added over 600 of these rules to the law of Moses. Quite a list to remember! The problem with this, aside from the obvious, is that they were not concerned about the true inward life of a person but with outward conformity to rules and regulations. Paul later warned these at Corinth of the danger of legalism. Confessing that God had made him “adequate *as a* servant of a new covenant,” he interjects, “*not of the letter* but of the Spirit; *for the letter kills*, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). Much of Paul’s writing addresses the Pharisaical tendency of legalism.

The opposite extreme in dealing with these gray area issues is *license*. License is like legalism in that it knows no gray areas. However, unlike legalism that sees everything in black and white, license knows no gray areas because there is little black. Almost everything is white. For these, everything is acceptable that is not expressly forbidden in Scripture. Where Scripture is silent, they have the freedom to live as they please as long as their conscience is clear. We must be careful here that we do not confuse liberty with license. Christian liberty is a central teaching of the New Testament. Jesus said, “If you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31-32). Paul wrote, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, *there* is liberty” (2 Cor. 3:17) and, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free” (Gal. 5:1). But Christian liberty is not unrestrained license. It is never freedom to sin, no matter if your conscience is clear.

Both of these extremes existed in the church at Corinth. So Paul addressed the issue of Christian liberty to help them understand how far the believer can go in regard to behavior not expressly forbidden in Scripture. There are limits to Christian liberty. In this text, we see that *Christian liberty is limited by a loving concern for others*. Paul structures this passage around

the knowledge that these at Corinth had acquired. Each section begins with the statement, “**We know.**”

1. We Know About Things Sacrificed to Idols (8:1-3)

There were some in Corinth who were claiming rights based upon the deeper understanding of spiritual things that they had. In this instance this knowledge was about things sacrificed to idols. As we noted in the beginning of our study in 1 Corinthians, Corinth was a center for idol worship. There was the Acrocorinth, the temple on the Mount of Corinth, where the Corinthians would go to worship their plethora of pagan gods. There was the god of war, the goddess of love, the god of travel, the god of the sea, the goddess of justice, and so on. Each of these gods required sacrifice, which was at the center of this worship. The burning of the sacrifice was done for two reasons, to satisfy the gods and to cleanse and purify the meat from demons, which pagans thought could enter a person through the meat. The legs and the insides of the animal were burned at the altar, the priests and city officials were given their share for payment, and the remainder was returned to the family that offered the sacrifice to eat, either as part of a banquet or in the privacy of their home. We will look at these situations over the next few weeks as Paul continues to address the issue of liberty in the context of meat offered to idols. What presented a particular problem in our text is that idol worship was so prevalent that there was more meat than the priests or the families could eat. This leftover meat was then sold in the marketplace.

The issue was not that they continued to sacrifice meat to idols after they were converted. That would be sin, plain and simple. The question was what to do with this meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Could they eat it or not? This presented an interesting dilemma for the believers at Corinth because when the meat was sold in the market, it did not have a stamp on it, “Sacrificed to Ares” or “Sacrificed to Poseidon.” So the buyer was unable to know if the meat they were purchasing was a sacrificial leftover. Further, they were often invited to public gatherings where this meat, thought to be the best available because it had been cleansed and purified, was served. This would be the case at many banquets and weddings.

Paul’s response to this issue reveals his concern. The mature believers at Corinth saw no problem with eating this meat, as we will see from their reasoning that follows. However, there were some weaker, immature believers that tended to be somewhat legalistic in their approach to this issue, some to the point of believing it was sin to even touch the meat, much less eat it. So there was division in the church between license and legalism. Paul’s response is twofold. As John MacArthur points out, “Paul’s responses to the reasons were *directed* to that group of more mature believers. But his responses *centered on* the other group” (*1 Corinthians*, 191). Both sides were wrong in their approach.

Paul begins, “**Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge.**” In dealing with the more mature believers who flaunted their presumed deeper knowledge of spiritual things, Paul reminds them, “**we *all* have knowledge.**” He includes not only himself in “**all**” but more importantly the weaker believers. They too had knowledge, limited as it was. They were babes in Christ. The difficulty here is that these more mature believers were right. There was absolutely nothing wrong with eating this meat. They were free to do so as long as their conscience was clear. The problem was with the way they did it. They ate it no matter what anyone else thought. They were right in a wrong way. You may have heard it said that there is nothing more dangerous than good theology wrongly timed. That was the problem with these more mature believers.

Paul reminds them that **“knowledge makes arrogant.”** Paul is not belittling doctrine. He would never say that knowledge is unimportant. Knowledge of God’s Word is fundamental to the growth of a Christian. One cannot know and obey Christ without knowledge of Scripture. The Lord said of His people Israel, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6). However, it is easy in the Christian life to confuse *growing* and *swelling*. Knowledge is essential for Christian growth, but it can become a source of pride, puffing up and making one arrogant. Arrogance is destructive to the body of Christ.

Paul strikes right to the heart of this arrogance, **“If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know.”** He reminds them that they have not yet arrived. While they know more, they do not know all. Paul put it a bit differently later in this letter, “When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. *For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face*” (1 Cor. 13:12).

On the other hand, **“love edifies.”** Love builds up rather than tears down. Love is concerned for others interests and well-being rather than their own freedoms (Phil. 2:4). While knowledge is crucial, wisdom is the right application of knowledge. Wisdom relates that one truly understands the knowledge they have acquired. Love is crucial to how one presents and applies knowledge. Right doctrine must be taught and lived in love. In Revelation 2 the problem with the church at Ephesus was that while they had their doctrine right, they had failed to love and they are rebuked for it. So we must remember that we are to have a loving concern for others in our doctrinal discussions and practices.

Paul then says that the most important thing is not what *we know about God* but that *He knows us*, **“but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.”** John wrote, “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him” (John 14:21). It is impossible to know God rightly and not love Him. Loving God is evidence of a right relationship to Him. Further evidence that we are right with God is our loving concern for others. 1 John 5:1, “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the *child* born of Him.”

So we see the principle set forth by Paul: Knowledge without love breeds arrogance. On the other hand, love without knowledge breeds ignorance. There must be a balance of knowledge and love in the Christian life.

2. We Know That Idols Are Nothing (8:4-7)

In vv. 4-7 Paul returns to the subject of meat sacrificed to idols and shows that he basically agreed with the Corinthians theologically. Concerning idols he writes, **“We know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world.”** Here, as in v. 1, Paul quotes the letter that he had received from them stating what they knew. Paul again shows that their knowledge is correct. An idol is nothing. That is not a gray area. They had learned this from various places in the Old Testament. Isaiah 44:12-20 shows the utter futility of a god of man’s imagination. In Psalm 115 and 135 the psalmist compares Israel’s God, Yahweh, to the idols of the pagans, again showing that idols were nothing. Notice the description given by the psalmist:

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of man's hands. They have mouths, but they cannot speak; they have eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but they cannot hear; they have noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but they cannot feel; they have feet, but they cannot walk; they cannot make a sound with their throat. Those who

make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them. [Psalm 115:4-8; 135:15-18]

Paul's emphasis is the same as the psalmist. Idols are nothing. They cannot walk; they cannot hear; they cannot see; they cannot smell. An idol has no real existence in the world. It is simply the result of someone's imagination, or, as we will see in 1 Cor. 10:20, the impersonation of a demon who deceives through it. This is reinforced by the Corinthians own understanding **"that there is no God but one."** They understood what we read earlier from Deuteronomy 6:4, known as the *shema*. The Jew knew that "one" meant "one and only one." Christianity understands this as well. Since God is one, then any other god really is nothing.

Then notice what Paul says in v. 5. In language that is difficult to interpret because it is not a complete sentence, Paul asserts, **"For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords."** He almost seems to contradict his preceding confession that there is but one God. But this is not the case. Notice how he effectively questions the reality of these "gods" by inserting the word **"so-called."** It was not that these idols did not exist in some form, whether it be precious metal, stone, or wood. They were there for all to see and worship at their convenience. There were many of these gods and lords. However, contrary to the belief of the pagans, they had no form of deity. They existed in name only and there was nothing authentic about them. And they could not claim deity because that was reserved for God alone.

Then in v. 6 Paul concludes his thought with one of the richest testimonies of the deity of God and Christ in Scripture, **"yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him."** There is only one God and Lord, and that is God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. **"Father"** shows the intimate, personal relationship the believer has with God when they come to faith in Christ. Through the Holy Spirit bearing witness with their spirit they recognize that they are children of God and are able to cry out, "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15) and in Him find warmth, compassion, and protection. But as Roger Ellsworth correctly asserts, it is not enough for one to know God only as Father because it does not describe all that God is to the Christian. The Christian also acknowledges God as Creator and sovereign Ruler. Paul says that God is the one **"from who are all things"** and the Christian exists **"for Him"** [*Strengthening Christ's Church*, 142].

Let that sink in for a moment. This is more than simply a feeling the Christian has *about* God. It is who He is. He is Creator of and sovereign Ruler over all things. Some professing Christians today acknowledge God as Creator but seem confused by the fact that we exist for Him. Those that call Him Father and Creator but neglect His sovereign rule live as if God existed for them. It is easy to become twisted in our thinking that God exists for our purpose and comfort rather than our existence for Him according to His good pleasure.

Paul deepens his thought on knowing the one God by asserting that one can only truly know Him through the one Mediator, Jesus Christ. Everything is **"by"** the Son, a testimony of His deity, and everyone must come to the Father **"through"** the Son. In other words, the only way to know God and worship Him is through Christ and Christ alone. No meat sacrifice is needed because Christ alone is the only sacrifice acceptable to the one true God.

Paul then gets to the crux of his concern in this text, **"However not all men have this knowledge"** (v. 7). To this point Paul has been content to discuss what it was the mature believers at Corinth knew. He has even shown his agreement with them on these theological matters. In v. 1 Paul said that **"all have knowledge."** **"However,"** he says, **"not all men have**

this knowledge.” In other words, there were those weaker brothers who did not have the depth of knowledge concerning these things that the more mature believers had and perhaps took for granted. The concepts of “there is no such thing as an idol in the world” and “one God” were just that to the weaker brother, concepts. They did not fully understand what these more mature believers grasped. John MacArthur comments:

Not all believers were mature in their knowledge and understanding of spiritual truths. Some were new Christians, freshly out of paganism and its many temptations and corruptions. They still imagined that idols, though evil, were real and that the gods the idols represented were real. They knew that there was only one *right* God but perhaps they had not fully grasped the truth that there is only one *real* God. [194]

Do you see the difference? They had not fully grasped what “one God” really means. And those that did rejected anything that had to do with idols, sacrificial meats included, for fear of falling back into idolatrous practices. While they understood the basic tenets of the Christian faith, the wickedness associated with idolatry was still fresh to them. Their consciences were not yet sanctified enough for them to eat idol food without the temptation of falling back into that lifestyle.

3. We Know That Food Is Nothing to God (8:8-13)

Again, Paul quotes what they knew from the prior letter, **“But food will not commend us to God. We are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.”** This is simple logic. Since these idols are nothing, then the food offered to them is also nothing. Neither eating nor not eating will bring one closer to God. To do something that God has not forbidden has no spiritual significance whatsoever. The believer is free to act as he pleases.

However, while the act itself is morally neutral, the consequences of the action may not be, and this is Paul’s concern. **“But take care that this liberty of yours does not become a stumbling block to the weak.”** What happened at Corinth was these weaker believers saw the more mature believers partaking of meat offered to idols, whether it be at a banquet, at a wedding, or purchased for their own personal use. In seeing this, **“their conscience, being weak, was defiled”** (v. 7). In seeing these stronger believers eating meat, the weaker ones rationalized that it must be OK and were **“strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols.”** In other words, they went against their conscience, and sinned by doing so. The result, **“For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died.”** **“Ruined”** means “to come to sin.” Because of the actions of the more knowledgeable the weaker brother fell. The more mature were stumbling blocks to the weak. The result, **“by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it was weak, you sin against Christ.”**

The principle that Paul shows is that we must be careful with our liberty. With freedom comes responsibility. Our liberty is limited by a loving concern we should have for others, in this case, particularly those that are weak. While the action itself may not be sinful, the result of the action might be. That is why Jesus said, “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matt. 18:6). The spiritual implication of Jesus’ words is that it is a very grave thing to be the cause of a weaker brothers fall.

Paul’s conclusion about meat sacrificed to idols, **“If food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.”** This from a man

who was far more mature and knowing than these at Corinth. He understood that others are watching our every move. He knew that those who are weak are looking for any excuse to justify their actions. Paul seems to indicate that for the sake of the weak and the cause of Christ, he would be willing to give up eating meat altogether rather than cause his brother to stumble.

Conclusion

Let me close by offering a few guiding principles to help in deciding whether or not to participate in any behavior. I am not going to reinvent the wheel in doing this. John MacArthur has provided the following checklist (*1 Corinthians*, 197):

1. *Excess.* Is the activity or habit necessary, or is it merely an extra that is not really important? Is it perhaps only an encumbrance that we should willingly give up (Heb. 12:1)?
2. *Expediency.* Is what I want to do helpful and useful, or only desirable? Paul said, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable,” or expedient (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23a).
3. *Emulation.* John wrote, “The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked” (1 John 2:6). Paul told these at Corinth, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). If we are doing what Christ would do, our action not only is permissible, but good and right.
4. *Example.* Are we setting the right example for others, especially for weaker brothers and sisters? Paul told Timothy, “Show yourself an example of those who believe” (1 Tim. 4:12).
5. *Evangelism.* Is my testimony going to be helped or hindered? Will unbelievers be drawn to Christ or turned away from Him by what I am doing? Paul wrote that the believers are to “Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity” (Col. 4:5).
6. *Edification.* Will I be built up and matured in Christ? Will those weaker be built up and made spiritually stronger? Paul wrote, “All things are lawful, but not all things edify” (1 Cor. 10:23b).
7. *Exaltation.* That God would be glorified and exalted should be the supreme purpose behind everything we do. Will the Lord be lifted up and glorified in what I do? “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).