

1 Corinthians 8 (2013)

- When we teach children math or science, the best teachers will emphasize key principles over memorization of questions and answers
 - If I teach someone to memorize specific answers to questions, then they really haven't learned much
 - As long as the questions don't change, they can parrot back the correct answer
 - But if the variables change even slightly, then the student is lost
 - It's as if they have to start over again in solving the puzzle
 - But if I teach a student the underlying principles, the basics timeless truths, then they are equipped to solve any problem that comes along
 - This method of teaching is especially important when learning spiritual truths
 - And Paul has followed this method in Chapter 7 as he answered the church's questions on marriage
 - On that first topic, Paul taught three basic principles that hold true in any circumstance
 - First, marriage is a one-flesh relationship that cannot be broken by the efforts of men, so we honor marriage for life
 - Secondly, each man or woman should remain in the condition in which they were called
 - A Christian conversion does not compel us to seek a new social status on Earth
 - Rather, it demands we seek after a kingdom that is not of this world
 - Finally, Paul counsels that singleness be given serious consideration in light of its advantages for serving Christ
 - These are principles that guide us in making decisions about marriage under any circumstances
 - Under this umbrella, we have much liberty and few restrictions

- And this will be the pattern Paul will use throughout the rest of this letter
 - Answer specific questions with a few specific imperatives but many more general guidelines and principles
- The second of the questions Paul was posed by the church is answered in Chapters 8-10
 - This question concerns eating meat sacrificed to idols
 - Obviously, with three chapters to cover this topic, we'll take some time to examine all that Paul says
 - But in case you are thinking that this topic can't hold much value for the modern Christian, let me assure you it does
 - Because Paul responds by teaching on a principle that transcends a specific situation, like meat sacrificed to idols
 - And Paul uses Chapter 8 to set forth the principle he wants to teach

1Cor. 8:1 Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.

1Cor. 8:2 If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know;

1Cor. 8:3 but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.

1Cor. 8:4 Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.

1Cor. 8:5 For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords,

1Cor. 8:6 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.

1Cor. 8:7 However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.

1Cor. 8:8 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.

1Cor. 8:9 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

1Cor. 8:10 For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?

1Cor. 8:11 For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died.

[1Cor. 8:12](#) And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

[1Cor. 8:13](#) Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.

- As we get into this topic and Paul's answer, we need some background on Greek culture
 - All ancient Greek culture was replete with idol worship, which largely took place in temples, much like churches of today
 - Pagan cultic practice regularly included an elaborate meal as part of their worship service
 - These pagan celebrations were common as part of state festivals (like government holidays of today) as well as private celebrations
 - The pagan worship ritual surrounding the meal typically had three parts
 - The first part of the ritual was preparation for the sacrifice
 - Following the preparation ritual, an animal was sacrificed
 - Finally, the meat of that animal was the centerpiece of a feast
 - Obviously, this process took a few hours, so the entire event was a major social experience
 - The meat of these sacrifices were commonly divided into three parts
 - First, a small part of the meat would be burned to the pagan god or gods as an offering
 - A second small part of the roasted meat was set before an empty table to honor the supposed god who was believed to be in attendance at the ceremony
 - Finally, the majority of the meat was served to the attendants and worshippers in the temple
 - The entire event honored the god who was presumed to be present
 - These meals were an intense and important social occasion for the participants

- It was a highlight event in Greek society, like a Super Bowl party or Christmas party today, only held regularly
 - Most if not all of the Christians in Corinth has likely attended these gatherings regularly before coming to faith
 - It was likely their primary social experience
 - One commentator called these temple meal services the ubiquitous restaurant of antiquity
- At these celebrations, worshippers supplied the animals used in the sacrifices, as their personal gift to the gods (think of it as BYO meat)
 - Consequently, the amount of available meat usually exceeded the appetite of the worshippers at the temple service
 - So after the service was concluded, the temple attendants would take the extra meat and sell it in the marketplace, called the Greek agora
 - The sale of the meat provided income for the temple and the temple attendants
 - The general Greek population shopped for daily necessities in the agora, including browsing meat shops stocked with temple sacrificed meat alongside regular meat
 - Under these circumstances, it could be difficult for a shopper to tell the difference between meat that had been sacrificed in a temple service from the regular meat
 - Nevertheless, the best meat was often the temple meat, because worshippers generally offered only their best animals in sacrifice to the gods
 - So a picky shopper would naturally gravitate to the better cuts of meat, increasing their chance of selecting temple meat
 - Because of these Greek practices, a Christian living in Corinth faced a couple of challenges associated with meat sacrificed to idols
 - First, a Christian would undoubtedly be tempted to continue participating in the temple services
 - These services were a primary source of joy and social connection in Greek society

- These were the country clubs of today, so to cut off attendance altogether meant isolating oneself from friends and family
- But these events clearly posed a threat to the Christian's witness and maturity, hence the dilemma
- Secondly, just shopping in the local agora posed a challenge for a Christian
 - How does a Christian avoid the temple meat?
 - Or should a Christian even be concerned with the source of the meat they eat?
- These issues were at the heart of the church's question to Paul, and in this chapter Paul is answering both issues
 - As we consider Paul's response, it quickly becomes apparent that one situation concerned Paul far more than the other
 - As I mentioned at the beginning, Paul wants to teach principles of Christian living rather than merely answer questions about specific circumstances
 - So he begins his answer by quoting a well known Greek saying:
 - We all have knowledge
 - The meaning of the slogan was, there are some things everyone should understand so we need not suffer the ignorance of fools
 - The slogan meant we don't need to accommodate someone's ignorance if that ignorance is self-imposed
 - But Paul challenges that slogan by saying knowledge makes someone arrogant, where love for another is edifying
 - If we're not careful, we can become arrogant and unloving to others in the body of Christ because of something we think we know and they don't
 - It can puff up our pride, it can give us license in our own minds to treat them with contempt
 - And it makes others feel left out, judged and mocked
 - Furthermore, in v.2 Paul says the one who believes they have mastered some topic of spirituality, they are showing themselves to be a fool

- When it comes to understanding God and our call to please Him, there will always be far more we don't understand than what we have learned
- Imagine an undergraduate student claiming to have mastered mathematics, physics or medicine?
- So what should be harder to understand? Science or the Author of all Creation?
 - Obviously, understanding God and His wisdom is infinitely more challenging than any other subject
 - So if other subjects take a lifetime to master, we shouldn't ever think we have all the knowledge when it comes to things of God
- In fact, the pursuit of knowledge cannot lead us to God unless it makes us more like God
 - In v.3 Paul says a true pursuit of God and of godliness is found only through a sincere love for God
 - And if we love God truly, then we will also demonstrate love for His people
- Therefore, the Christian is called to make love for our brothers and sisters a higher goal than seeking empowerment through greater knowledge
 - For example, Paul acknowledges in vs.4-6 that an informed Christian knows full well that there is no such thing as an idol
 - Obviously, idols exist in the sense that pagans invented and worship idols
 - Paul says in v.5 that these so-called gods exist in many forms throughout the unbelieving world
 - But the informed Christian now understands that there is only one true God Who made all things and Who called us to Himself
 - The rest are figments of the unbeliever's deceived mind
 - Therefore, the meat sacrificed to these false gods is no different from any other meat

- Our knowledge of the truth removes a sense of guilt concerning eating this meat, since we know the meat is not changing our relationship with Christ
- The fact that an unbeliever previously chanted some mumbo jumbo when preparing the meat is irrelevant
 - We know the whole thing is a farce, a sham
 - So we can freely enjoy the meat without worry
- But then Paul steps back from the specific issue and returns to the principle at the heart of this question
 - In v.7 Paul reminds the Corinthian church that not all of their Christian brethren have broken free from their pagan roots
 - Not all men have this knowledge that pagan gods are powerless and without power
 - Paul explains that they were accustomed to idols until now
 - He means they were devoted pagan followers all their lives
 - And it takes time for someone to move beyond the influence of such things
 - They are babes in Christ, and in this fragile state they are still trying to understand the truth while reconciling it with their past
 - Consider the shock it must be to suddenly understand that everything you thought was true is a lie
 - Everything you've been taught was patently false
 - All the ritual and verse and songs you were taught were meaningless and pointless
 - All the power you thought these so-called gods possessed was never there at all
 - All your hopes and expectations for what your gods could accomplish has been exposed as false hope and unmet expectations
 - Perhaps there is no greater shock possible than for someone to lose their religion

- Of course, it's all for the best since they have now come to know the truth
- Nevertheless, Paul acknowledges it takes time to come through this process
- I think something happens when someone comes to understand that Evolution is false and the world has been taught a lie
 - It takes time to wrap your brain around the fact
- Paul says those Christians who live in this vulnerable infantile state are of special concern for the rest of the body
 - We must consider how to behave in light of their weak conscience
 - It's not enough to say they have the same knowledge we have
 - It's not a kind of loving to expect them to push all that history aside in an instant and dismiss their feelings and instincts
 - We took time to grow in our faith, so must every Christian be allowed the same time
 - Secondly, we must not make the highest priority in the body the exercise of our liberty or the exhibition of our confidence in knowledge
 - We may know that idols are nothing and that eating meat sacrificed to idols is nothing, but that doesn't mean we have no other concerns to consider
 - Paul says in v.8 that we don't commend ourselves to God when we exercise our freedom to eat anything
 - In other words, we don't prove our maturity by what we allow for ourselves
 - We prove our maturity by what we are willing to deny ourselves
 - Who is the more mature in the faith?
 - The one who enjoys alcoholic drinks because he knows it's permissible?
 - Or the Christian who denies himself the privilege out of concern for the weaker brother?

- It's not the exercise of our freedoms that please God, but rather our self-restraint exercised in love for one another
- So the measure of our spiritual maturity isn't how much we know, but how we put what we know to practice by showing love for others
 - In the case of eating meat sacrificed to idols, the Corinthians' new-found understanding of idols had freed them to enjoy meat without guilt
 - But the decisions they made impacted others in the church
 - Paul reminds them in v.9 they must take care not to exercise their liberty in such a way that they become a stumbling block for the weak
 - Paul calls the conscience of immature Christians weak, in the sense that they couldn't experience liberty in this area without defiling their conscience
 - Our conscience is our internal compass, the conviction the Spirit gives us to help steer us into righteousness
 - As we grow in our maturity, that compass becomes stronger and more accurate
 - But in the early days of our walk, the compass is less discerning
 - We can make a comparison to learning how to swim in a pool
 - When we first put a child in the pool, they need a lot of help to keep them from danger
 - As they grow more confident, they graduate to water wings, and when they're ready they swim in the shallow without assistance
 - Finally, one day they swim even in the deep end without concern
 - Likewise, when a new Christian is exploring the limits of liberty, they need a lot of help to protect them from danger
 - If they are thrown into difficult situations too early, it's like throwing a toddler into the deep end of a pool
 - Bad things are going to happen
 - That's Paul's concern here

- Those in the church who understood liberty were still frequenting the temples to dine, and buying the sacrificial meat in the agora, but this practice offended and concerned other Christians
 - So the question posed to Paul was whether it was acceptable to eat this meat and to attend these temple services
 - And as we can see, Paul elevated the conversation to a bigger, more important issue
 - We may not inflict harm on a fellow Christian through our pursuit of liberty
 - Paul explains in v.10 that if one of our weaker brothers observe us dining in the temple, won't they become confused about what is right?
 - They may be strengthened to eat meat sacrificed to idols
 - Paul means they will be encouraged by our behavior to act against their own conscience
 - Their conscience is still telling them that this is wrong
 - In their hearts, they made a decision to forsake pagan idols
 - They turned from such things to follow the true and living God
 - And so any thought of returning to that world sets off alarm bells in their heart, warning them to stay away
 - But then they see you, a respected member of the church, eating in the temple, appearing to enjoy the spectacle, oblivious to any concerns
 - Immediately, the weaker Christian experiences an inner conflict
 - On the one hand they feel their God-given conscience telling them to stay away from these things
 - On the other hand, they watch you modeling a different behavior and wonder if their conscience is wrong
 - Paul says the outcome will be that they will be strengthened to follow your examples
 - What he means is this weaker brother or sister has been taught by the stronger Christians that it's OK to ignore their conscience

- The problem isn't whether this specific action is permissible or not...the problem is how it impacts the weaker Christian's future sanctification
 - When we give a brother or sister license to go against their conscience, even in matters where they have liberty, we are setting them up for future ruin
 - In v.11 Paul says we have "ruined" our brother or sister
 - We have assisted them in ignoring their own convictions and to go against their own conscience
 - And in doing so, Paul says we have sinned against them and we sin against Christ
 - The sin we commit is in failing to uphold the commandment to love one another
 - The highest goals of the Christian life is to demonstrate love toward God and toward His people
 - But if the pursuit of our liberties leaves another Christian ruined, then we certainly have not loved them more than ourselves
 - And because we have turned our back on the Lord's commandment, we have failed to love the Lord as well
 - Finally, we have become a stumbling block to our brother or sister, leading them into sin
 - Ironically, though the specific behavior may be permissible in liberty (like eating meat sacrificed to idols), if we go against our conscience, we still sin
 - James says:

James 4:17 Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.

- The right thing is according to the leading of the Spirit, and if we teach a brother to go against their own convictions, we are teaching them to ignore the Spirit
- And as they obey such an example, they will be sinning against the Spirit
- We have become their stumbling block

- So our chapter ends with Paul's application of this principle
 - He says that if enjoying a food is the cause for a brother to stumble, then he will gladly never enjoy that food again
 - The enjoyment of meat or of any passing thing in this life is secondary to the building up of the body of Christ
 - This is another example of living with eyes for eternity
 - Whatever passing pleasures we may enjoy in this world – and there are many we have liberty to enjoy – all of them combined are less important than even one Christian soul
 - Leading others into sin is a serious offense, according to Paul
 - So serious that it should lead us to change our behaviors whenever necessary to avoid such an outcome
 - This is a voluntary change, not one required by scripture but one made necessary by our love for one another
- Naturally, Paul's statement raises questions for us on what are the limits of such self-sacrifice?
 - For the mature Christian it may seem unfair to give up liberties for the sake of those too weak to share in them
 - The answers to these concerns come in the next chapters
 - But for now, let's dwell on the fundamental principle Paul taught us today
 - Enjoying liberty is not the highest goal in Christian life
 - Loving God and loving our brothers and sisters in the body is a much higher goal
 - And so we must exercise our liberty in love, sensitive to the convictions of others