

1. Christian Liberty

- a. A few weeks ago we talked about the wisdom of discerning between what we can do and what we should do. There are many things in our own lives that we can do that aren't beneficial for us to do. They may not be good or bad in particular. They just aren't beneficial.
- b. And then there are other things that we can do that we shouldn't do. Things that may be ok for another person, but given certain circumstances, they aren't probably ok for us.
- c. All of this led to the discussion about our need to exercise wisdom and discernment. We have great liberty as Christians, but we shouldn't take that liberty for granted. Instead, we should use it wisely, choosing to do the more beneficial thing as opposed to just doing things because we can.
- d. That discussion came from 1 Cor. 6. Today we are looking at 1 Cor. 8 where Paul is talking about a similar issue. Whereas in chapter 6 he was talking about how beneficial things might be for ourselves, here in chapter 8 he is talking about the way our decisions and actions affect other Christians.

2. Christian Responsibility

- a. Even though this chapter is often referred to as Paul's talk on Christian liberty, I think it is better understand as Christian responsibility. Sure we are free to do certain things, but if they hurt another Christian, then we have a responsibility to do the thing that won't hurt the believer.
- b. The particular issue discussed by Paul is the issue of eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols. The context is that the Roman Empire was a pagan empire. There were practices that would have been commonplace in the empire that few people would have questioned. But once people started becoming followers of Christ, they began to question whether there was danger in some of these cultural activities that had pagan ritual attached to them.
- c. The issue with the meat sacrificed to idols was one such area of concern for some new Christians. There was a belief at that time in various gods and demons, and many believed that demons would try to infect people through food. This may be related to food-borne illness from foods improperly cooked or stored- since much meat and things were just bought right out on the street.
- d. There was a custom of sacrificing the meat to idols of gods to attempt to ward off any demonic interaction that might have taken place with the meat. After the meat was sacrificed, it would be served at a feast or festival to the god it had been sacrificed to, and the remaining meat would be sold at the markets. So if one was buying meat at the market, there was a good chance they were buying meat that had been sacrificed in a pagan ritual.
- e. There are a few important points that Paul makes here. First, **1 Corinthians 8:1-3** Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. <sup>2</sup> The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. <sup>3</sup> But the man who loves God is known by God.
  - i. Paul isn't saying that knowledge is bad and love is good- even though some have quoted this verse to make just such a statement. Instead, Paul is saying

- that knowledge isn't enough to settle delicate matters. Love has to be interjected as well. In this case, there was a dispute about whether it was sinful to eat meat sacrificed to idols. While the more mature Christians knew it was not- for reasons we will get into in a second- they needed to temper that knowledge with love and concern for the weaker among them.
- ii. You may have heard the saying that there is a difference between being right and being righteous, and that would be the point here. It wasn't wrong to eat this meat. But it didn't make it righteous either- not when eating the meat would harm the conscience of a weaker believer.
- f. The second point then follows the first. And that point is that it wasn't wrong to eat meat sacrificed to idols. There was a definite knowledge aspect to this, and Paul made clear that there were those with a weaker conscience who were wrong, but that instead of factoring in right versus wrong, they needed to factor in what was best for protecting the weaker brother.
- i. **1 Corinthians 8:4-7** So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. <sup>5</sup> For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), <sup>6</sup> yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. <sup>7</sup> But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.
  - ii. Paul's reasoning is that the Christian knows that these false gods and idols don't actually exist. So as long as they stay true to Christ, they wouldn't be defiled by eating meat sacrificed in a false pagan ritual. This would be a different story if they were taking part in the ritual. But to simply buy a piece of meat from a vendor that may have been sacrificed to an idol by a pagan wasn't something they should worry about.
  - iii. But not everyone had such a strong conscience. Some believed it to be a sin. And even though Paul says that it wasn't a sin, he recognized that it would still be a sin for those people to violate their conscience. Because in so doing, they may be tempted into actual sin. Even though in verse 8 Paul makes clear that the meat itself is morally neutral.
- g. This leads to the third point, that the stronger believers have a responsibility to the weaker.
- i. **1 Corinthians 8:9-12** Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling-block to the weak. <sup>10</sup> For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? <sup>11</sup> So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. <sup>12</sup> When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.
  - ii. Why does the weaker brother end up sinning when he sees the stronger brother eating the meat sacrificed to idols? Paul is saying that the weaker brother, the one who has the wrong view on the issue, may then assume that the pagan aspect of eating the meat is also not wrong. So the weaker brother, seeing the stronger eat the meat, may decide that there is nothing wrong with

the whole pagan ritual, and therefore will enter into sinful acts that he otherwise wouldn't have.

- iii. Thus Paul draws a dividing line between the Christian's freedom in eating meat sacrificed to idols and his responsibility in not causing another to stumble.

### 3. Christian Compassion

- a. So we come back to Paul's opening statement on the issue that knowledge puffs up but love builds up. What is the responsibility of the Christian? Is it to simply be right? Or is it to build up others in their walk with Christ?
- b. Somehow in recent decades the American Dream has become a radical individualism that leads us to all pursue our own desires at the expense of those around us. Christians have been no different than non-Christians in holding this view.
- c. Does this passage make it sound like Paul would approve of such behavior from Christians? We might say, "Hey, I know that eating meat sacrificed to idols is fine, so I don't care what they think." Paul responds, "You are right about the meat, but you are wrong about your brother in the Lord."
- d. Paul seems to be calling the mature Christian to act with compassion, willfully setting aside his own liberty in order to strengthen a fellow Christian. It isn't a call to give up everything because everything could cause another to stumble. Instead, it is a call to compassion that should lead to discipleship or mentoring.
- e. Think of it this way, if you know there is a weaker brother or sister- and often the one with the weaker conscience is likely to be one younger in the Lord- then take the time to mentor them and teach them what is right. But do it in a loving way that builds them up. That may require not doing certain things for a while until you are able to teach that person the error of their judgment.
- f. What we are really seeing here is that the Christian life is a self-sacrificial life. This should be obvious just based on Christ's work on the cross. If we are called to be Christ-like, then we are called to be self-sacrificial as well. So we should be willing to put certain things aside, even when we are right, if we are putting them aside for the sake of a brother or sister in Christ.
- g. We have liberty but we have responsibility. We often want the former without the latter. But Paul says, "Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling-block to the weak... <sup>11</sup> So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. <sup>12</sup> When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ." We don't have the option. To be a mature Christian is to be self-sacrificial and put the needs of others ahead of the desires of ourselves.
- h. Paul's conclusion? **1 Corinthians 8:13 - 9:1** Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.
  - i. Let it be the same for each of us.