

Sermon 41: Love, Liberty, and the Conscience: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Text: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 "Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. But if any man love God, the same is known of him. As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him. Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse. But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak. For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend..."

Introduction:

- **The last several weeks:**
 - What is the conscience?
 - How does it work?
 - Is it an infallible guide?
 - How can it be healthy?
- **Principles to guide practical situations:**
 - **Dietary issues: Romans 13:12-15:3**
 - **Meat offered to idols: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13**
- **Three primary concerns:**
 - What makes an action evil?
 - What is the basis for our acceptance with God?
 - How should we relate to others in areas of conscience?

Concern 1: What makes an action evil?

- **The practicality of this question:**
 - Some Christians overthink this question and can become crippled in the process.
 - Should we feel morally responsible in some way if we pay taxes to our government which actively does evil things with the money we pay in taxes?
 - Should an employer feel morally responsible in some way if they pay employees who will ultimately use that money for evil?
 - Should we feel morally responsible if we give money to a homeless person who will use that money to buy drugs which are compounding their problems?
 - Should we feel morally responsible if we do not give money to a homeless person, because we do not want to contribute to their addictive behavior?
- **Paul's approach to answering the question:**
 - **Be fully informed, but humbled by your limitations:**
 - **The limitation of cultural attitudes 8:1** "We know that we all have knowledge..."
 - This was probably a reference to a Corinthian slogan regularly used in the culture.
 - Worldly thinking affects all of us to some degree.
 - We need to tread humbly acknowledging this limitation.
 - **The limitation of personal pride 8:1** "Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth..."
 - We have a tendency to get a competitive attitude in areas of controversy.
 - We get more focused on being right than doing right.
 - Our identity can become rooted in our positions rather our position.
 - **The limitation of imperfect data: 8:2** "If any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know..."
 - We often lack all the information we need to make an informed decision.
 - We often lack the ability to process all the information we have.
 - We often lack the ability to properly prioritize our conclusions.
 - We generally make decisions on impulse rather than calculation.

- **Look at the facts of the case: 8:4** "Concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols..."
 - **Fact 1: An idol has no power: 8:4** "We know that an idol is nothing in the world,
 - **Fact 2: There is only one true God: 8:4** "There is none other God but one..."
 - **Fact 3: Though there is only one true God, their society was filled with the worship of false "gods" through idols: 8:5** "Though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,)"
 - **Fact 4: They served the one true God who is the source of all things, and they were united to Him through Christ: 8:6** "But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him..."
 - **Fact 5: Some people did not yet understand these facts fully: 8:7** "Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge..."
 - Their polytheistic neighbors did not understand these facts.
 - Immature Christians did not yet understand these facts.
 - Some Christians understood these facts intellectually but had still not become freed in their conscience by this information.
 - **Fact 6: Those who ate the meat without a clear conscience were actively damaging their consciences by that action: 8:8** "Some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled..."
 - Those who worshipped idols were further reinforcing wrong thinking.
 - Those who were Christians but not thinking clearly about the issue were deadening their consciences by that action.
- **Summarizing Paul's analysis:**
 - Meat is neither morally evil nor good, because it is just meat.
 - Meat did not become morally evil because it was previously used in an evil practice.
 - Eating the meat after it had been previously used in an evil practice was not condoning or participating in that evil practice.
 - Some Christians in the Corinthian church could eat the meat with a clear conscience and others could not.

- Those who could eat with a clear conscience according to scripture were technically correct and those who could not were technically deficient in their thinking on that issue.
- We must acknowledge the reality that some Christians who love Christ cannot make this distinction in their minds.
- We must consider how our actions could potentially compromise our Christian witness.
- What makes an action evil is a blend of the action and the intent behind the action.

Concern 2: What is the basis for our acceptance with God?

- **Stated negatively: 8:8** "But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse..."
 - Our knowledge of the issue is not the basis of our acceptance with God.
 - Our decision to eat based upon this knowledge is not the basis of our acceptance with God.
 - Our decision not to eat out of ignorance or out of deference is not the basis of our acceptance with God.
- **Stated positively: 8:6** "To us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him..."
 - There is one God that should concern us.
 - We have been united with Him in Christ.
- **Summarizing Paul's analysis:**
 - Where one draws the line does not change their position:
 - Their position is rooted only in Christ and His finished work.
 - This fact should liberate one's thinking.
 - It should not lead us to a careless attitude toward the conscience.
 - It should not embolden presumptuous sin against this grace.
 - It should not give the impression there is no objective standard.
 - It should free us from enslavement to perfectionistic legalism.
 - It should free us from the pride or the helplessness that flows from this attitude

Concern 3: How should we relate to others in areas of conscience?

- **These principles are split between 1 Corinthians 8 and 10:**

- **Principle 1: Love them: 8:9** "Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak..."
 - You need to consider the implications of your actions because you love the people around you.
 - Just because you technically can do something, does not mean you technically should do something.
 - You should love your neighbor enough to not do things that you know can cause them to stumble.
- **Principle 2: Think before you act: 8:10-13** "If any man see thee which hath knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend..."
 - You do not want your actions to reinforce wrong patterns of thought.
 - You do not want your actions to embolden sinful actions.
 - You need to consider the big picture before you act, because you care about others spiritual wellbeing.
- **Principle 3: Do not over analyze the situation: 10:25-27** "Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no question for conscience sake: For the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof. If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go; whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience sake..."
 - Do not overthink the issue.
 - Do not unnecessarily draw attention to details that are unknown and unnecessary to consider.
 - Do not ask unnecessary questions, that will make it impossible to properly function in your society.
- **Principle 4: Limit your involvement once a difficulty arises: 10:18-30** "But if any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience sake: for the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof: Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other..."
 - There is no issue till it is raised.
 - Once it is raised, limit your liberty.

- Do not allow yourself to be unnecessarily conflicted over the situation.
- **Principle 5: Do not misunderstand the reason for the adjustment: 10:29-30** "Why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience? For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks?"
 - **Do not allow yourself to become frustrated with the need to adjust.**
 - Why am I being held captive by others who are not thinking clearly?
 - Why am I being falsely accused if I am actually in the right
 - **Remember, the adjustment is not being made because you were wrong.**
 - **Remember, you made the adjustment to limit offense for the sake of ministry.**
- **Principle 6: Make your decisions based on what brings glory to God, not what makes you most happy in the moment: 10:31** "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God..."
- **Principle 7: Know your context and adjust appropriately for the good of others: 10:32** "Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God..."
 - Understand the Jewish context and adjust to avoid unnecessary offenses.
 - Understand the Gentile context and adjust to avoid unnecessary offenses.
 - Understanding the dynamics of the local church and adjust to promote unity and godly edification.

Applying this Instruction:

- We must know the people we are interacting with.
- Out of love for them, we avoid putting them in situations where their conscience will become conflicted.
- This does not mean that we personally are obligated to follow everyone else's viewpoints in our personal lives, however in social and corporate contexts, we need to lovingly show deference.
- We need to understand this concept personally, and we need to communicate this to our children,
- We do not want them to develop an elitist attitude toward other Christians.

- We do not want them to develop the perception that there is inconsistency or hypocrisy.
- We want then to have discernment and relate to other Christians in deferential love.
- We cannot teach these matters without many conversations, and opportunities will inevitably develop as our children grow older.
- God can bless Christians of differing conviction and levels of maturity.
- Our union with Christ must cultivate our highest sense of security and identity.