

The Loving Limits of Liberty

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Pray...

Three Things...

This morning, we are going to look at 1 Corinthians 8 and see “The Loving Limits of Liberty”. If you have your Bibles, turn to 1 Corinthians 8....

Let’s read **1 Corinthians 8:1-13...**

Introduction (“Now Concerning”)...

About four weeks ago, Steven Schouten preached on 1 Corinthians 7. In that chapter, the Apostle Paul addresses the first of several distinct topics in response to questions or issues raised by the Corinthian church. Paul addressed these issues by stating... “***Now concerning...***” These phrases signal a shift in focus to specific matters of concern for the church. 1 Corinthians 7:1 begins... “*Now concerning the things about which you wrote...*”. Steven addressed the Corinthian church’s concern about marriage.” Last Sunday, John Marc addressed the last verses of chapter 7. 1 Corinthians 7:25 begins... “*Now concerning virgins...*”. John Marc shared what the Bible has to say about singleness. Today, chapter 8 begins... “*Now concerning things sacrificed to idols...*” This issue of eating food sacrificed to idols was a common practice in Corinthian society and caused division within the church. Families often participated in religious sacrifices, offering sacrificial animals in pagan temples. In many rituals only part of the meat was burned. The priest and the family making the sacrifice took the rest. This consecrated meat was taken home and eaten or sold in the marketplace.

That specific practice still exists with many people groups around the world. This is particularly true within the context of Hinduism,

Buddhism, and various tribal regions. These practices are often deeply ingrained cultural and religious traditions, with food offered as a form of devotion, appeasement, or seeking favor from deities or spirits. Some people within Islam and Catholicism may also engage in food offerings. In some cases, food offered to idols may be consumed by the worshippers after the offering, while in other cases, it may be left for the deity or spirit.

This morning, we are going to look specifically how the Apostle Paul answered the question the Corinthian Church had regarding “things sacrificed to idols.” The basic problem that the Corinthians were dealing with is one that we still deal with today. The issue is: **How far does Christian freedom go in regard to behavior not specifically forbidden in Scripture?** This is an issue that the church has debated for the past several generations that has centered around practices that many believers feel to be wrong but that are not specifically forbidden in Scripture.

When I was young, my grandparents had some interesting rules in the house. They did not believe in going to movies. They did not believe in playing card games. They did not believe in watching TV on Sundays (unless it was sports). Other issues debated have been regarding drinking alcohol, smoking, wearing makeup, dancing, and styles of music. Why do believers debate such things? Because the Bible does not specifically forbid them.

The Bible does address specific things that a believer is to do and other things they are not to do. In these cases, things are black and white. Many things however are not, as one pastor puts it...“commanded, commended, or forbidden in Scripture” (John MacArthur). They are neither black nor white, but grey.

What do we do with these grey areas? Again, how far does Christian freedom go in regard to behavior not specifically forbidden in Scripture?

Today we will answer that question. I have titled the message, “The Loving Limits of Liberty.”

Christian liberty is a gift—but it must be guided by love. In a healthy church, the strong and the weak live in harmony, neither judging the other. Yet when pride creeps in, the strong may look down on the weak, and the weak may condemn the strong. Paul confronts this tension in Corinth, calling the “strong” to let love lead their liberty—for the sake of their brothers and sisters in Christ. True strength isn't flaunting freedom but using it to build others up. Love doesn't pamper but patiently edifies. Knowledge must be tempered by love if unity and growth are to thrive. **In 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Paul gives four admonitions for us to follow in discerning right and wrong in the area of questionable things.**

I. Consider Your Own Attitude vs 1-3

II. Consider Your Brother's Knowledge vs 4-8

III. Consider Your Brother's Conscience vs 9-11

IV. Consider Christ vs 12-13

My prayer this morning is that we would be a healthy church guided by love as we practice certain behaviors that God's Word does not specifically forbid.

Let's look at Paul's first admonition in verse 1-3...

I. Consider Your Own Attitude.

In the city of Corinth, people could buy meat from two places—either the regular marketplace, where it was more expensive, or the local temples, where leftover meat from animal sacrifices was sold for cheaper. Some of the more mature Christians knew that idols weren't real gods, so they didn't see any problem with buying the cheaper meat from the temples. They were just being practical and saving money.

Also, when non-Christian friends invited them to dinners where this kind of meat was served—whether at someone’s house or at a temple—they went without thinking much of it. But this really bothered some of the newer or more sensitive Christians. Many of them had come out of idol worship themselves, so seeing other believers eat meat that had been part of a sacrifice was confusing and upsetting. It made them wonder why Christians would want anything to do with something connected to idols. This started to create tension in the church, so the leaders decided to ask Paul for advice.

Notice Paul’s instruction in verse 1. *“We know that we all have knowledge.”* Paul is giving instruction to the mature Christians in the church. They were enriched in spiritual knowledge. The problem was that they were proud of it. They were proud of the knowledge they had. They knew that an idol was nothing, merely the representation of a false god who existed only in the darkened minds of those who worshiped it. The presence of an idol in a temple was no solid proof that the god existed. So, the conclusion was logical: A nonexistent god could not contaminate food offered on his altar.

Paul then calls these mature believers out on their view of knowledge. He says, *“knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.”* But isn’t knowing God’s Word important? Yes. Knowledge of God’s Word is extremely important. **Romans 15:4** says, *“For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”* And **Colossians 1:9** says, *“For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,”*

The Corinthian believers were mature in knowledge but were NOT mature in love. By itself, knowledge makes arrogant. One pastor says, “To have love but no knowledge is unfortunate; but to have knowledge and no love is equally tragic.” One of the many spiritual problems that

the Corinthian church dealt with was arrogance. They were proud and puffed up. Paul continues, *“If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.”* These mature believers were proud of what they knew. But that was a problem. One commentator writes, “the “mature” believers in Corinth were infatuated with abstract theological or philosophical knowledge but remain woefully deficient in their knowledge (and love) of God.” They don’t “know as they ought to know.” Their knowledge has puffed them up. Paul is challenging them to consider their own attitude. Yes. They had knowledge. But they were arrogant. They needed to consider their own attitude. They need to work on love. I love the passage that Jeff read earlier from Philippians 2:1–4....*1 Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, 2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. 3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.* Later in September and the first part of October, Adrian, Steven and John Marc will be covering 1 Corinthians 13 which gives more in-depth instruction on love. So, the mature believers needed to consider their own attitude.

As we look at verses 4-8, we see the next admonition...they also needed to consider their brother’s knowledge.

II. Consider Your Brother’s Knowledge.

In these five verses, Paul repeats the truths that the mature believers know. Notice the similarity of verse 4 with verse 1. *“Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that...”* And he continues to explain what they have knowledge of. That *“...there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.”* This is a true statement. And then he continues **in verse 5 and 6**, *“5 For*

even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, 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.”

Again, what do they know? What is true? **First**, there is no such thing as an idol in the world. **And second**, there is no God but one. So, since there is no such thing as an idol, I am free to eat meat offered to an idol because the idol doesn't exist. That is a true statement. Paul doesn't disagree. But then Paul brings up these “*so-called gods*” in verse five. And he states that there are many “*so-called gods*.” The only reason they exist is because they are believed to exist. And since people believe them to exist, they must be considered. Paul continues, “*Yet for us*” (mature believers) there is only One God. Paul reminds the believer who God is. I like how one pastor words it, “He (God) has come to us in the person of the Son, Jesus Christ, and we are brought to the Father through the divine Son. Everything comes from the Father, and all believers exist for the Father. Everything is by the Son, and everyone who comes to the Father comes through the Son. This is a powerful and clear affirmation of the equality of essence of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Then Paul brings up **one more truth in verse 7**. He says, “*However not all men have this knowledge.*” Paul wants the mature believers to consider their brother's knowledge. What do they know? What do they believe? They believe in the “*so-called gods*.” Verse 7 continues, “*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.*” **Who are these people?** These are the people who are new to Christianity. They recently practiced offering meat to idols. The practices of their life before Christ was very fresh in their minds. They still believed that the gods and idols were real. They thought it would be sinful for a Christian to partake. **Is the practice of eating meat morally or spiritually wrong?** The answer to that question is found at the end of verse 7, “*Their conscience being weak is defiled.*” Even when an act is not morally or spiritually wrong, it becomes wrong if it goes against one's conscience. If they go against their conscience, they are defiled. One pastor defines a “defiled conscience” as “one that has been ignored and

violated. It brings confusion, resentment and feelings of guilt. A person who violates his conscience willingly does what he thinks to be wrong. In his own mind he has committed sin; and until he fully understands that the act is not sin in God's eyes, he should have no part in it." So, is the practice of eating meat morally or spiritually wrong? If the one with the weak conscience believes it is wrong, then it is wrong for that person to practice.

Paul states in verse 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."* Paul is stating another truth: that food has no real spiritual significance. What's the point Paul is trying to make? Even though the act of eating meat sacrificed to idols is not sinful, consider your weaker brother's beliefs. Because for him, he currently believes the act of eating meat sacrificed to idols is sinful.

Many have been taught that it is a sin to do things that God does not declare to be sinful. But if I practice the thing that is not itself sinful, but I believe it is a sin, then it is sin. So it is important that stronger or more mature believers consider the weaker brothers knowledge.

Next, verses 9-11 tell us to....

III. Consider Your Brother's Conscience.

Paul continues to explain. You are not worse if you eat the food offered to idols or better if you eat. Food has no spiritual significance. You can eat it. Then there is a "But" in verse 9. Paul says, *"But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak."* Paul is saying there is nothing wrong with eating the meat UNLESS it would become a stumbling block to your weaker brother.

Paul then asks the mature believers to consider this

argument...Verse 10....*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? Perhaps the weaker brother will see you eating. He knows that you are mature. He*

wants to be like you...mature....so he decides to eat. Isn't that a good thing? Won't that make him mature? **Paul answers in verse 11...***11 For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. What does ruined mean?* It means that we have caused that person to sin by leading him into a situation that he cannot handle. So, if a person has a weak conscience, should we do what we believe to be right with hopes that they will be strengthened? No! It's not a good thing to ask the weaker brother to do something that his conscience tells him not to do. Remember what verse 7 said? They are defiled. It is sin for them to do what they believe to be sinful. So what are we to do when it comes to our liberties? Consider our brother's conscience. Why? Because Christ died for your brother. Which leads us to the fourth thing to consider...

IV. Consider Christ.

Paul ends this chapter with an important piece of knowledge that perhaps the mature believer had not considered. **Look at verse 12...***12 And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.* Causing a weaker brother to stumble is not only a sin against that brother, but also a sin against Christ. I think the mature believer would not want to sin against Christ. I hope he wouldn't. **Then Paul concludes in verse 13 with a "Therefore".** "Therefore," in light of the knowledge we now have after considering our own attitudes, after considering our weaker brother's knowledge, after considering our weaker brother's conscience and after considering Christ. Paul says in verse 13...*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.* Paul comes to the conclusion that he does not want to cause his brother to stumble. And he hopes that will be the conclusion of the mature believers in Corinth as well.

Paul wants the mature believers to Consider their own attitudes. Are they practicing what they believe is a liberty because of self-pleasure or pride? What is their attitude about their liberty. Have they considered

their brother's knowledge? He might be at a new believer with some things that he still needs to work through so he can grow and change where needed. Have they considered their brother's conscience? The brother may believe something to be true that is not true. And what might not be a sinful practice for you might be for him? And finally Have they considered Christ? Christ died for the weaker brother.

The passage this morning was really directed toward the mature believer...

Closing Thoughts...Discernment...Where do I draw the line?

One pastor said, "What happens when the weaker brother wants to elevate the scruple that he or she has to the level of a moral standard for Christianity or a standard that must be obeyed to be a member in good standing, or a standard that becomes necessary to be obeyed in order to be an officer in the church? Now what? Now the weaker brother becomes the legislating brother and now begins to take the scruple that he or she has and uses it to bind the consciences of the people and destroy Christian liberty. What do you do now? Who really is the weaker brother?

How do you discern it? We have to be very sure that the standards we impose upon people in the church are Biblical standards and not our own traditional scruples.

What if I am a weaker brother? What if my conscience is not yet fully informed by biblical truth? Perhaps this is due to a lack of spiritual maturity or understanding. The key to growth is doctrinal instruction and spiritual maturity.

What do I need to do to grow?

- 1) Grow in Knowledge of God's Word. Study Scripture diligently and learn sound doctrine (especially the truths about Christian liberty, idolatry, and the nature of conscience).
- 2) Be taught by mature believers. You must be willing to learn and not remain in a state of immaturity. You are taught messages from the pulpit. But it would be great to be in a discipleship relationship. Make sure you are discipled by mature believers.
- 3) Understand Christian Liberty. Christian liberty is based on truth, not on feelings. The weaker brother needs to come to understand the freedom we have in Christ, which includes freedom from man-made rules or fears related to things that are not inherently sinful. Stop being governed by fear or tradition.
- 4) Mature in faith and walk in spiritual liberty. Strengthen the Conscience. Align your conscience with God's Word. This happens when a weaker brother grows in truth and becomes more confident in what God has declared to be clean or acceptable.

Let's Pray.