

1 Corinthians

Gospel-Centered Living in a Sin-Centered World

Section 3: Liberty and the Gospel

Free to Love

1 Corinthians 7:17-40

Introduction

ILLUS: Cain and Abel – “Am I my brother keeper?”

So far in 1 Corinthians the sections we have covered are Unity and the Gospel, and Purity and the Gospel. Today we move into the third section ... Liberty and the Gospel.

This section flows from 1 question that fills 3 chapters!

It specifically addresses the issue of Christian Liberty (or freedom) which is a central theme in the New Testament.

John 8:31–32 (NKJV) — 31 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. **32** And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

Galatians 5:1a (NKJV) — 1a Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free ...

It is an issue that Paul has already touched on in 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 6:12 (NKJV) — 12 All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.

The context is regarding “things sacrificed to idols” speaking of the eating the meat that came from pagan temple sacrifices.

ILLUS: Romans were polytheists.

“It was believed that evil spirits were constantly trying to invade human beings and that the easiest way to do that was to attach themselves to food before it was eaten. The only way the spirits could be removed from food was through being sacrificed to a god.” (MacArthur, 190)

Part of animals were consumed in the sacrifice and part left to the priests in payment for his/her services. Because of the amount of sacrifices, the priests would often sell their portions to market owners which would be offered for sale to the public.

There were three possible ways in which a Christian could come across meat sacrificed to idols: 1) In temple worship, 2) In the marketplace, or 3) An invitation to dine in someone’s home.

It would be almost impossible for a believer living in the Roman culture to not be confronted with this situation, thus the reason they posed the question to Paul.

While the context of this passage is largely foreign, the principle is as, if not more, applicable today. It really speaks to the “gray areas.” You know the ones that have caused the most debate regarding the Christian life through the years: playing cards, dancing, music styles, makeup, movies, modesty, Sunday sports, and alcohol.

Historically, such questions have led to two extremes – legalism and license (which was true of the Corinthians as well). But what Paul points us to here in chapter 8 is love.

Love > Knowledge (1-3)

Here, Paul continues to answer questions that the Corinthian believers posed to him in a letter.

But it is important to note that while he was addressing “things offered to idols” that he began with “knowledge.”

This has been a recurring theme in the book and one of the things that the believers in Corinth were most proud of.

If you will recall Paul has already addressed the supposed wisdom the Corinthians thought, they had saying that God sees the wisdom of the world as foolishness.

1 Corinthians 3:21a (NKJV) — 21a Therefore let no one boast in men.

Also, on multiple occasions, he has noted that such wisdom and knowledge leaves one “puffed up” (literally self-inflated).

1 Corinthians 4:6 (NKJV) — 6 Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself

and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other.

Again, Paul addressed their arrogance by either mocking a saying common among the Corinthians (we all have knowledge) or letting them know that they weren't as "special" as they thought because (we all have knowledge).

But what is most striking is that Paul doesn't pit knowledge against love.

"Knowledge of God's Word is extremely important. It is impossible to believe or obey what is not known ... But knowledge, even of God's Word, is not enough ... to have knowledge and no love is ... tragic." (MacArthur, 191-192)

He contrasts a particular application of knowledge. Knowledge can puff up, while love builds up. Knowledge is inward focused, and love is outward focused.

Then he states, in the negative, the defining characteristic of one who truly knows. If you think you know anything, you know nothing.

ILLUS: The reality is that the more you learn the more you know you have left to learn.

"The limitations of human knowledge should promote humility rather than pride." (Taylor, 205)

"Ignorance does not know that it does not know. True knowledge does not know and knows it." (MacArthur, 192)

Then Paul drives his first point home – the question is not what you know but who you love.

If you love God, not only does it mean that He knows you, but that you will in turn love others. Because ...

1 John 4:19 (NKJV) — 19 We love Him because He first loved us.

Matthew 22:37–39 (NKJV) — 37 Jesus said to him, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ **38** This is the first and great commandment. **39** And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

So, having clearly taught that Love > Knowledge, Paul then teaches that ...

Knowledge ≠ Liberty (4-8)

Just Because You Know (4-6)

He returns here to the topic at hand, “concerning eating the things offered to idols.”

He begins with stating that those who know the One true God know that an idol is really nothing.

Because ...

Deuteronomy 6:4 (NKJV) — 4 “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!

This is not to deny that there are not other “so called gods) – this was certainly true in the Roman culture. Only that those are false gods ... idols.

Because again ...

“There is only one God”

Then Paul makes one of the most significant theological statements in all of Scripture. That the One God exists in the persons of ...

The Father: of whom are all things and we for Him

The Son: through whom are all things and through whom we live.

Yet, just because you have been blessed with such knowledge ...

Doesn't Mean Others Know (7-8)

This is where the fact that Knowledge ≠ Liberty finds its application.

THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN RAISED WITH SUCH THINGS ALTHOUGH BELIEVERS STRUGGLE

ILLUS: New Believers who are from a party background, alcoholic homes, porn, sex addiction

ILLUS: Or even non-believers with limited knowledge of what believers are called to be

Although the context is different, Paul addresses the same issue in Romans 14

Romans 14:14 (NKJV) — 14 I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

And such actions, taken by believers with more knowledge, can defile the conscience of weaker believers.

The fact is that eating or abstaining from eating makes no difference in our relationship with God because we know the idols are nothing.

However, it can have a direct effect on others relationship with God, which is why ...

Love > Liberty (9-13)

Because even correct knowledge and the proper exercise of our liberty (literally “a right”) can cause a weaker brother to stumble.

Paul then gives a scenario:

If a weaker brother sees you doing something (in this case eating the meat that has been sacrificed to idols), will not he be “emboldened to do the same.”

“Emboldened” is the same word from verse 1 that described love as “building up.”

What love builds up, liberty can tear down!

This is literally stated in verse 11 – “and because of your knowledge shall the weaker brother perish”

“Perish”: here is not a good translation. It literally means to destroy

Again, what the love shown to a weaker brother can build up, liberty taken in front of a weaker brother can tear down.

ILLUS: If they see you eat food sacrificed to an idol, they think it is ok, partake as well, only still struggle with the reality of the idol, don't realize that God is One, and then take Jesus as only one god, thus don't follow Him at all.

The question becomes do I love the liberty I have more than my brother? Is my right more important to me than my brother's faith?

Philippians 2:3 (NKJV) — 3 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.

ILLUS: 70-80% of men and 40% of women in the US view porn. Modesty is a biblical principle, but it is also a practical problem in our culture.

This is Paul's point. Knowledge may tell me that I have the liberty, but love for others tells me that not to take advantage of the liberty.

But even greater than that. Paul says that this is a brother, “for whom Christ died.”

Is the freedom I have gained in Christ of more value to me than the sacrifice that Christ made for us all?

“Our Christian liberty must never be used at the expense of a Christian brother or sister who has been redeemed at such a price.” (MacArthur, 196)

Now, note this drastic shift from what Paul has been saying.

Are idols anything? No!

Then is eating the meat sacrificed to idols sinful? No!

So, based on this knowledge alone, are mature believers at liberty to eat of such meat? Sure!

But Love > Liberty.

Galatians 5:13 (NKJV) — 13 For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

And if the exercise of your liberty (which is without sin) causes your brother to stumble, it becomes sin, not only against your brother but Christ Himself!

So, if Love (of Christ and our brother) > Liberty, then what should be our response?

“Therefore” ...

I will never do it! Literally, “I will never, ever ... unto the age.” (Swindoll, 129)

Conclusion

ILLUS: Marathon runner whose friend wants to begin running. Muslim or Jew coming to faith and eating or offering bacon.

Who we really are and what/who we really love is revealed in these situations.

Love > Knowledge, Knowledge ≠ Liberty, Love > Liberty.

Yes, we are free in Christ. Free to love Him and Others as He loves us.

Love is the key to living the Christian life and sets the boundaries of Christian liberty.

To love as Christ loved us ... we must as He did be willing to lay down our liberties.

Is it: Is it consistent with the Word, is it Worthy of Christ, does it reflect Walking with Christ, will it Wound my Brother, does it Witness to Christ, does it lead to the Worship of Christ?