

Lesson 2**TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT?**

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

BACKGROUND

Corinth was a wicked city filled with idolatry because of pagan temple worship. Polytheism was so rampant that the streets and public squares of Corinth were lined with statues of gods. The concept of many gods was at the very center of Corinthian society. Every convert to Christianity in Corinth was saved out of this idolatrous heathen worship. All Christians agreed a complete break with heathen practices had to be made after one became a Christian. ***They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9). Dear children, keep yourselves from idols (1 John 5:21).***

Paganism with its polytheism and rank immorality colored everything in the city. The fundamental question for the small and emerging Christian community in Corinth was how to function in the midst of such a rampant heathen culture. The church was in a cultural conflict. How was a Christian to live in an idolatrous immoral society?

Among the Christians, there arose the problem of meat offered to idols. Many of the pagan temples in Corinth contained banquet facilities. All the events held in the dining halls, whether social or cultic, had a basic religious character. The Corinthians were big meat eaters and almost all of the meat sold in meat markets and restaurants had first been offered to idols. There were some Christians in Corinth who thought it absolutely wrong to eat any meat offered to idols because it was part of that old system from which they had been delivered. They were weak brothers in conscience and their doctrine of Christian liberty was not straight. These weak brethren became offended at the actions of the strong brethren and began to judge acts and motives. On the other hand, there were some strong Christians in conscience who saw that the meat offered to idols was nothing, so they felt free to eat the meat. They had no conscience or scruples about the matter. Their tendency was to despise and snub those who chose not to eat. Obviously there was a division in the local church at Corinth over this issue.

DECLARATION OF THE GOVERNING PRINCIPLE IN QUESTIONABLE PRACTICES

Love is Superior to Knowledge. 1 Cor. 8:1-3. Now about food sacrificed to idols. We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God.

The strong brothers in conscience were disgusted with the legalistic tendencies of the weaker brothers in conscience. A weak brother is not someone who is necessarily unspiritual or doctrinally unsound. Nor is he weak because he does not practice certain questionable practices (he may have solid convictions about his actions), but he is weak because he cannot stand to see others practicing questionable practices and he fears he might fall into them, so he is harsh with a judgmental spirit. Those who had liberty were crying out: "We know we all possess knowledge." They said every Christian in Corinth knew an idol was nothing, and the weaker brothers were wrong. The stronger brothers were absolutely right in their understanding of Christian liberty but wrong in that they felt that knowledge alone was the solution to solving this problem. There was a higher law than right doctrine and that was the law of love. In essence, they were saying that the weak brethren were wrong, narrow minded and ignorant. They honestly felt the weaker brethren should be straightened out before they ruined the local church with their legalism. Paul's general comment to the strong brothers was, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." The strong brothers were long on knowledge and liberty but short on love.

EXPLANATION OF THE PROBLEM IN THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH

Is Meat Sacrificed To Idols Sinful? 1 Cor. 8:4-6. 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. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), 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.

The stronger brother is right when he says there is nothing to an idol. It is only a piece of wood or stone and the gods they represented are a hoax. It is mere superstition. There were no deities behind these idols but there were supernatural beings (demons). ***No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons (1 Cor. 10:20).*** While there are no gods, there are demons, but demons are everywhere. Yet, the practice of eating meat sacrificed to idols is not inherently sinful and the Christian has liberty to indulge. No questionable practice is inherently evil in itself and the Christian has liberty. Yet, the Christian needs to be aware of demonic activity in questionable practices if they are not entered into Biblically.

APPLICATION OF THE GOVERNING PRINCIPLE TO THE PROBLEM IN THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH

Love Is More Important Than the Use of Christian Liberty. 1 Cor. 8:7-12

Exhortation to The Weaker Brother (8:7-8): "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. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and not better if we do. Not every Christian at Corinth had knowledge that meat offered to idols was nothing. They could not make the theological and practical distinction between meat and idolatry. They still made a religious connection between the meat and the idol. It is not just meat for the weaker brother but meat offered to idols that in his mind was sinful.

For these weak brothers to eat meat would defile (soil) the conscience (the seat of right and wrong). Aquinas defined conscience as the inner voice we have that either accuses us or excuses us for our actions. The conscience is defiled not by the partaking of polluted food, for food cannot pollute. ***“Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’? For it doesn’t go into his hear but into his stomach, and then out of his body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean.”) Mk. 7:17-18.*** *The conscience is defiled by doing something the unenlightened conscience does not allow.*

What is a weak conscience? It is a conscience inordinately sensitive to religious scruples, which needs instruction, training and development so as to enlighten the person to Christian liberty. When the weak brother gets his conscience enlightened, he still may not choose to use his liberty, but he will not be judgmental of those who do.

How then is the conscience defiled? If the weaker brother thinks about getting involved in a questionable practice or actually gets involved, he feels condemned and guilty, but at the same time he subconsciously likes the idea. His conviction of “taste not” is sincere but he is placed into frustration, not because the Bible says it is wrong but he (out of his background and culture) feels it is wrong. The rule for the weak brother is: *“When in doubt, don’t”* (Rom. 14:23). Any questionable practice, which cannot be done by a Christian, should not be practiced because it will cause him to sin, defiling his conscience. A Christian must never violate his conscience and to do so would be sin. *He may open his conscience to understanding and training, but he must never practice any questionable practice until he has a clear conscience to do so, or he will end up sinning in a big way.*

A Christian is not one bit more spiritual if he partakes of some questionable practice or chooses not to partake. Eating meat or any other questionable thing is a matter of indifference or neutrality. We gain nothing by refraining from using our liberty in this matter, and we gain nothing for exercising it. A Christian with weak conscience needs to grow up spiritually so as to accept the brother who can participate in some questionable practices, even though his conscience may never allow him to do so himself.

Exhortation to The Strong Brother (8:9-12). ***“Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom (rights) does not become a stumbling block to the weak. 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? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.”***

Paul's appeal is not to the weaker brother but to the stronger brother who should have more Christian maturity because he has right doctrine and understanding in the area of questionable practices. Paul pleads with the strong that they may have an understanding and care for the weaker brothers. *While a Christian has the right to Christian liberty, he may not always exercise that right to keep a brother from stumbling.* The strong brother wants his rights at all costs. Therefore, personal liberty often becomes a battle cry to indulge his own whims and appetites regardless of the effect on others.

The Greek word for "stumbling block" is "a stone in the pathway, something that trips one up and makes progress difficult." A stumbling block is the putting of an obstacle in the way of a Christian brother so as to hinder his spiritual growth. A stumbling block would be tempting a weaker brother to go against his conscience—a practice above all other dangerous to the Christian. It appears in this context that the stronger brothers were *abusing* their liberty so as to cause the weaker brethren to stumble. Paul appeals to these mature believers to apply the principle of love to their weaker brethren. Their conduct was not to be governed by their knowledge (which was right) but by their love. Paul reminds the strong brethren that no Christian is at liberty to assert his rights, if that means doing harm to others.

The Christian who says he is going to do some questionable practice no matter what any person thinks, and he is never going to yield to any narrow-minded legalist who needs to get in the 21st century, really does not understand grace. The strong brother is not as mature as he thinks he is. The actions of the strong must never hinder the spiritual progress of the weaker brother; therefore, the mature believer willingly gives up that which is all right to do to help the weaker brother come to understand grace.

When a weak brother sees a strong brother eating a delicious T-bone steak in the temple restaurant, it will embolden, strengthen, encourage or influence him to try it for himself, even though his conscience says it is wrong for him. In trying this questionable practice, the weaker brother may go back into his old idolatrous habits, bringing disgrace on his Christian testimony. Opening his weak conscience to eat meat sacrificed to idols, which he saw a strong brother do, gets the weak brother out of fellowship with Christ because of past association with idolatry. The result is the weak brother gets destroyed (ruined) spiritually. The stronger brother has influenced the weaker brother to do something his conscience could not handle. The obvious result is a spiritual disaster because his weak conscience gets hardened and insensitive to the danger of the questionable practice that he cannot manage. Misuse of freedom by the strong may well inflict ruinous damage on the weak by inducing them to do what they otherwise might not do. Christ died for the weak brother and Christ loves the weak brother as much as He loves the strong brother. *If Christ loved the weaker brother enough to die for him, then the strong brother ought to love him enough so as not to put any stumbling block in his way, which might hinder his spiritual growth.*

The Greek word for "wound" means, "to inflict blows with a fist, staff or whip." The weak brother's conscience is sensitive to a blow and is like a slap in the face when he sees a strong brother using his liberty. Every Christian is in spiritual union with Christ, and any

sin done against the believer is a direct sin against Christ. Whenever the stronger brother wounds the conscience of the weak brother over any questionable practice, the stronger brother has sinned, not only against the weaker brother but also against Christ. ***But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea (Matt. 18:6).***

CONCLUSION ABOUT QUESTIONABLE PRACTICES FOR THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH

Christian Liberty Should Be Restrained For the Good of the Body of Christ (8:13):

“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.”

The word “fall” means, “to set off a trap.” It is equivalent to making a weak brother fall into sin. If the questionable practice causes a weak brother to fall into sin, then Paul says, “I’ll never eat meat. I’ll be a vegetarian if necessary.” He did not say, “I’ll eat just a little meat”, or “I won’t eat when a weaker brother is around.” Paul would not eat meat ever if that were what it took to help a weaker brother from stumbling and maintain the unity of the Body of Christ. The important thing to Paul was not his own rights, nor his own comforts or pleasures, but the well being of all Christians. Paul chose to operate on a higher principle than knowledge. He operated on the highest principle, which is love. *It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall (Rom. 14:21).*

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Paul is not playing down knowledge. We must have knowledge to guide the conscience. The conscience in the believer is fallen and sinful, and the “inner voice” convicting of right or wrong may be the internal conviction of the Holy Spirit or the subtle delusions of Satan or the flesh. The Word of God alone can sensitize the conscience, so as to let it be the Christian’s guide. Paul is not deprecating knowledge but appreciating love as the highest principle.

Paul is not saying a Christian must abandon all Christian liberty to appease the ignorant prejudices of legalists and bigots. A person with a weak conscience is still sincerely wrestling with the right or wrong of a particular action. A legalist is someone who has been taught the right Biblical position on Christian liberty, but continues to be set in his wrong, prejudice convictions and demands that everyone conform to them.

Paul does not say the strong Christian must be permanently shackled by the weak brother. It does not say a Christian should never use his liberty, but he may temporarily set it aside to help the weak brother understand grace.

Paul does not say that strong Christians ought to be concerned about Christian taboos all over the world and seek to conform. The emphasis is upon offending a brother in your culture, and that only *"if someone sees you."*

What Paul is teaching is that because of the stronger brother's concern and love for the weaker brother, he chooses not to exercise his right of Christian liberty for fear that he might influence the weak brother to violate his conscience and fall into sin. *A strong brother is free to exercise liberty and he is just as free not to exercise it.*

Paul is saying that with liberty comes more responsibility to use one's freedom wisely and discreetly, and to never abuse that liberty.
