

Liberty, Legalism and Love

Paul moves to the next topic, the issue of personal Christian liberties. Specifically, this issue had to do with eating or abstaining from sacrificial meats. The more mature Christians felt there was nothing spiritually infectious about eating sacrificial meats, but the weaker were offended by the implication of participating in anything that has to do with pagan worship. If the weaker Christians went to the meat market, they would ask, "Did this meat come from the pagan temple?" The problem was, the meat was likely to show up anywhere. It could go from the temple to the meat market, then into hundred of different homes. The weaker Christians became obsessed with asking where the meat came from no matter if they were guests at someone's home or eating at the church potluck. They were not content just to try to protect themselves from eating sacrificial meat, they were offended that any Christian could possibly eat the meat without any qualms.

So, the question was something like this: "Many of us here have no problems eating meat that came from the pagan temple sacrifices. However, there are those among us that not only refuse to eat, that not only question the source of every meat they are presented with, but also condemn those who don't have a spiritual problem with eating the meat. This has become quite a divisive issue in our church."

It takes the next three chapters for Paul to give his complete answer to this question. He actually gives the short answer up front, but then he spends the rest of chapters 8, 9, and 10 fleshing out the answer. The three chapters are more or less summarized like this:

Chapter 8 – Food has no moral component. It doesn't bring you closer to God nor does it separate you from God.

Of course, the context of this is that meat is meat. It matters not where it came from or what religion the butcher was. It carries no spiritual influence. Paul was not talking about the abuse of food, such as gluttony. He was just talking about one cut of meat compared to another.

However, love and concern for others trumps our Christian liberties.

Chapter 9 – Paul uses personal examples of how he forfeits his personal liberties and rights for the greater good.

Chapter 10 – Paul warns the "stronger" or "more mature" Christians how easily liberty can turn into license and gives four examples of how some of the children of Israel crossed the line and turned liberty into license causing them to perish in the wilderness.

Then Paul concludes his teaching by summarizing and returning to his opening statement. Yes we have liberties in Christ. But we also are part of a community and, as such, we have certain responsibilities within that community to our brothers and sisters that may require us to forfeit our liberties for the greater good.

We have modern day versions of this issue in today's American church. There always has been and there will always be issues to be hammered out about exactly how and where we fit in to the culture around us. We all know we don't fit well with the world and we will inevitably come to a point of going our separate way. On the other hand,

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God has not called us to completely cloister ourselves away from the world. The hackneyed old saying is so true – We are in the world but we are not of the world. The problem has always been finding exactly where that spot is without compromising or becoming needlessly legalistic.

I. To Eat Or Not To Eat; That Is The Question!

With regard to food sacrificed to idols, we know that “we all have knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ²If someone thinks he knows something, he does not yet know to the degree that he needs to know. ³But if someone loves God, he is known by God.

With regard then to eating food sacrificed to idols, we know that “an idol in this world is nothing,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵If after all there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), ⁶yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we live, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we live.

But this knowledge is not shared by all. And some, by being accustomed to idols in former times, eat this food as an idol sacrifice, and their conscience, because it is weak, is defiled. ⁸Now food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse if we do not eat and no better if we do. ⁹But be careful that this liberty of yours does not become a hindrance to the weak. ¹⁰For if someone weak sees you who possess knowledge dining in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience be “strengthened” to eat food offered to idols? ¹¹So by your knowledge the weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed. ¹²If you sin against your brothers or sisters in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. ¹³For this reason, if food causes my brother or sister to sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I may not cause one of them to sin.

A. Knowledge is not wisdom

Once again, we find Paul quoting another slogan familiar to the people in the Corinthian church. It was a boastful claim “all of us possess knowledge”. Paul wants to, first of all, put that bit arrogance in its proper perspective.

The first slap down he offers is “knowledge puffs us, but love builds up.” And with this statement, Paul lays down a fundamental foundation for his presentation that essentially says, “The responsibility to love each other trumps logic and liberty and personal rights. Love is the higher law. Paul refers back to this principle in the 13th chapter of this book where he says, “Now abides faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love!” This also agrees with the teachings of Christ who said the greatest commandment is to Love God and the second is to love our neighbor as ourselves.

The second rebuke is like our modern day equivalent, “Anyone who thinks he knows it all, knows nothing.” So, having cautioned the Corinthians against taking too much pride in their knowledge, (which they equated with spiritual maturity), Paul then agrees that there are those who are mature enough to understand these basic facts:

1. Idols are powerless pieces of wood or stone.
2. There is no true God but one.
3. The idol is powerless to taint the meat sacrificed to it.

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4. Therefore, sacrificed meat carries no spiritual poison. It is just meat.

That is simple logic one would think anyone could see, but the sad reality is there are some people who can't grasp that. They are considered the less mature and are somewhat gullible.

Perhaps there are some of the weaker in the faith who came out of idol worship and their conscience is defiled by the thought of partaking of pagan sacrificial food. They are equally disturbed that everyone else doesn't see things the same way they do. They are the ones you have to be considerate of.

¹⁰For if someone weak sees you who possess knowledge dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience be "strengthened" to eat food offered to idols? ¹¹So by your knowledge the weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed. (NET)

This is where we see the principle of love trumping liberty and rights and knowledge.

Another interesting bit of trivia here is that Paul quickly makes mention of Christians who happen to be dining in the banquet halls at the local pagan temple. Much like today, the public could rent out banquet rooms for weddings and such. Paul didn't condemn the Christians for using those facilities because the facilities were evil and the Christians might be tainted with sin, but he did warn them that in so doing, the weaker brothers and sisters might be drawn back into a lifestyle they had worked so hard to get out of. In view of that danger, the Christian should have a concern about whether their actions, based on liberty, might be a real stumbling block to younger Christians. If we cared deeply about the possibility of causing a young Christian to stumble, we would be willing to forfeit our rights rather than see someone fall back where they came from.

II. Living in The Sweet Spot

The "sweet spot" is that place between carefree indulgence in rights and liberties, and a life of legalism that condemns everything that has a questionable connection.

As Christians are forced to make these kinds of decisions every day we live. You might be a teetotaler, but how far do you take your stance against alcohol? Do you refuse to eat beer battered shrimp? Do you refuse to take cough medicine because it contains alcohol?

We have questions all the time about how far we dare connect ourselves with the world. Are there any limits to the kinds of video games you will play? Does it matter to you if the graphics are so violent they are rated for adults? Does it matter the kind of language you are willing to include in your choices of entertainment? Will you watch nothing worse than PG movies, or will you watch PG 13 but not R Rated? Or is R rated ok with you but you will never watch an NC-17. Will you watch NC-17, but not watch X rated?

Do you see nothing wrong with wine with your dinner, but you won't drink hard liquors?

What about the music you listen to. Do you have limits to what you will tolerate? In this day and age of x rated lyrics being belted out, does it bother you to listen to that, or do you just like the music and don't care about the lyrics?

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What about gambling? What about marijuana? What about dabbling in witchcraft or astrology or horoscopes? Do those things bother you? Where do you set your limits? What about the way in which we “honor the Sabbath”? Some people treat Sunday like all the OT regulations concerning the Sabbath apply to the first day of the week for Christians. Others are not as rigid about Sunday.

How do we come to a decision about how far we involve ourselves in issues like these? Is it all about searching out your liberties and rights as a Christian, or do you have any concern about how your actions may influence your children or your grandchildren? Does it matter to you how your decisions make impact a newborn Christian?

There are certainly some things that are clearly classified as sin according to scripture - lying, stealing, adultery, coveting, idolatry, and murder. But what about those things the Bible doesn't clearly, explicitly mention? The Bible doesn't say precisely how much clothing you should wear or not wear. The Bible says nothing about specifically mood altering drugs.

It is interesting how much culture influences our standards. As Craig Blomberg points out in his commentary, “Christian” standards vary so widely around the world. In Russia, it is scandalous among Christians for women to wear make-up and jewelry. Men believe it is a Biblical mandate to greet one another with a holy kiss – right square on the lips. In some areas of Africa and India, American missionaries planted the American cultural idea that it is sinful for a pastor to appear in church in anything but a white church and tie. When missionaries evangelize cultures where polygamy is practiced, the missionaries are then faced with the dilemma of how to deal with men who get saved having multiple wives.

But the fact that we live in a community means we have some responsibility for how we influence others. If you have children, you will be responsible for how you influenced your children. If you have young Christian friends, they will be watching you. Paul's most important message in the 8th chapter is that love and concern for others trumps your personal rights.

Take note that the word translated “strengthened” in verse 10 is the same Greek word translated “builds up” in verse one (knowledge puffs up; love builds up).

¹⁰For if someone weak sees you who possess knowledge dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience be “strengthened” to eat food offered to idols?

If we translate the word “build up” both times, then we see that we can build up people in a positive way, or we can “build up” people in a counterproductive way. You can be a godly influence or an ungodly influence.