



CHARIS-MATTERS

STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 8:1-13

Topic

The apostle Paul addresses the believers in Corinth whose liberty to eat meat sacrificed to idols was causing the weaker saints to sin

Title

"Meat: It's what's for Sinners"

Introduction

The following is taken from an email I received this week from a pastor asking for advice.

The challenge of dealing with medical marijuana has come upon our church. Not only do we have a guy that has a card to use it, but he will soon be authorized to sell it in our city. His name has been quoted a number of times in our local newspaper, and people will know that he attends our church. He is the current poster child for allowing a distribution center. I would suspect that that he has legitimate medical/psychological/organic problems. He is willing to leave the church if I ask him to, stating that he doesn't want to cause trouble.

Can a Christian partake of medical marijuana? If marijuana is ever totally legalized, can a Christian smoke pot?

These kinds of questions arise whenever Christians engage in questionable practices. A 'questionable practice' is behavior that some believers feel to be wrong but that is not specifically forbidden in the Bible.

First Corinthians 8:1-13

"Meat: It's what's for Sinners"

Historically those practices have included things like drinking alcohol, smoking, wearing make-up, wearing certain styles of clothing, dancing, listening to certain styles of music, observing certain holidays, and going to the movies or the theater.

If you were in first century Corinth the question you would be asking was, “Can a Christian eat the meat that has been sacrificed to an idol?” Some of the believers had the liberty to do so while others found that their consciences forbid them from doing so.

They undoubtedly wanted what we always want - a “Yes” or “No” answer.

There is no “Yes” or “No” answer to a question of questionable practices. There is instead a principle to apply: Love for your brothers and sisters in Christ limits your liberty in questionable practices.

I’ll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Your Liberty Is A Building-block When It Is Limited By Love, and #2 Your Liberty Is A Stumbling-block When It Leaves Out Love.

#1 Your Liberty Is A Building-block
When It Is Limited By Love
(v1-8)

The word “edifies,” found in verse one, means *build up*. As you fellowship with other believers, you want to build them up in their walk with the Lord. You want to encourage them, to strengthen them, to fortify them. You want what is best for them.

If you are not careful, however, you can instead become what is described in verse nine: a “stumbling-block.” How you approach your liberty in questionable things determines whether you will build-up or stumble your brothers and sisters in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 8:1 Now concerning things offered to idols...

First Corinthians 8:1-13
“Meat: It’s what’s for Sinners”

“Things offered to idols” is one word in Greek and can be translated simply as "idol sacrifices." Let me explain what scholars think was happening in Corinth. The “things offered to idols” were food offerings, symbolically presented in worship to the god in whose temple they were given. The particular issue was that of eating the food that had been offered in those sacrifices.

The Greeks and Romans were polytheistic, worshiping many gods. They had a god, or a group of gods, for every circumstance, every need, and every activity of any consequence. They were also polydemonistic, believing in many evil spirits. They believed the air was filled with evil spirits of all sorts.

It was believed that the 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 its being sacrificed to a god. The sacrifice therefore served two purposes:

1. It gained the favor of the god or gods.
2. It cleansed the meat from demonic contamination.

Idol offerings were divided into three parts:

1. One part was burned on an altar as the sacrifice to the idol.
2. The second part was given as payment to the priests who served at the temple.
3. The third part was kept by the offerer.

Because of the large number of offerings the priests were not able to eat all of their portion and they sold in the marketplace what they did not need. Marketplace meat was highly valued by the general population because it was cleansed of evil spirits. It was the meat served at public feasts. And it was cheaper in price than other meats.

There were believers in Corinth who had no problem eating meat that had been offered to idols. They could go to public feasts or into private homes

First Corinthians 8:1-13
“Meat: It’s what’s for Sinners”

and not even give it a second thought. They bought the meat at discount prices and served it in their own homes. Putting it in spiritual terms, we would say that they had liberty to eat it, and they were exercising their liberty.

But there were other believers who did not have a clear conscience about eating such meat. They felt it was wrong. Many of them had been saved out of an idolatrous lifestyle and the meat was an issue.

The believers who had liberty to eat the meat were ignoring the concerns of their brothers and sisters who were troubled by it. They were insisting on their liberty. Whenever confronted by those whose conscience bothered them, those with liberty had theological arguments for why eating things offered to idols was no big deal. Their arguments were not resolving the issue – so the church asked Paul to resolve it.

1 Corinthians 8:1 Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.

“We all have knowledge” is a phrase that summarizes the theological arguments the meat eaters were using. The knowledge they had, according to verse four, was that “an idol is nothing... and that there is no other God but one.” In other words, offering meat to the idol of a false god does not in any way affect the meat. It is still perfectly good meat and can make for a great barbecue!

They were *right* about the meat; but they were *wrong* about eating it without concern for how their behavior affected others. Paul answered them by saying “knowledge puffs up, but love edifies” – it builds-up.

1 Corinthians 8:2 And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know.

You can be orthodox, but arrogant. Whatever you “know” from God’s Word must be tempered by love for God and for your brothers and sisters.

1 Corinthians 8:3 But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him.

First Corinthians 8:1-13
“Meat: It’s what’s for Sinners”

Your relationship to God is a love relationship. You love Him; and you are “known” by Him – intimately, wonderfully, lovingly known to His heart. Paul was implying that if you are loved by God, and you love God then you will show it by loving those whom God loves.

Having established love as the answer to all questions about questionable practices, Paul summarized the “knowledge” about meat offered to idols.

1 Corinthians 8:4 Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one.

Paul was agreeing with their knowledge but he was also expanding upon it.

1 Corinthians 8:5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords),

There was something those with “knowledge” were failing to take into account. “So-called gods” means that they are the manifestation of demons. While an idol is nothing it can be dangerous if real demonic activity is involved.

Nonbelievers invent “many gods and many lords” but none are truly gods. There may be some reality behind an idol if a demon is involved; but there cannot be deity.

1 Corinthians 8:6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.

We should approach the world and everything in it knowing that God the Father is its source and the One for Whom we should be living. Jesus is the agent of creation and the One through Whom we have eternal life.

If I am living for God and in Jesus Christ then I will look upon the world and everything in it as something transient and temporary. Meat sacrificed to idols won't bother me. But since I am living for God and in Jesus Christ I will look upon other believers as being more important than my liberty to eat meat or my liberties in any other area.

First Corinthians 8:1-13
“Meat: It's what's for Sinners”

1 Corinthians 8:7 However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

You are free to eat meat offered to idols just as soon as your conscience will allow you to do so. Knowing you can eat it is a first step; but you still must be personally convinced. If you are not convinced in your own heart and mind then partaking of the meat, or of some other questionable thing, will “defile” you.

1 Corinthians 8:8 But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse.

Whether or not you ever have liberty in certain areas “does not commend [you] to God.” In other words, it doesn’t make you more spiritual, or leave you less spiritual. These are personal issues to be decided in your heart between you and God. No one can or should overrule your conscience.

This is a very important point. You see, we tend to think of those who exercise greater liberty as being more mature, as being more spiritual. *Not so!* We likewise tend to think of someone without liberty in a certain questionable practice as being less mature, as being less spiritual. *Not so!*

It’s important to realize this because often folks exercising liberty fool themselves into thinking they are growing when, in fact, they may be going backwards in their walk. And they tend to want to flaunt their liberties and lead others into them.

If you are looking for a “Yes” or “No” answer to the question of questionable practices you might be a little frustrated. But if you have been listening you see the answer.

We need to quit asking, “Can a Christian do such-and-such.” Instead we ought to be thinking, “How can I be used to build-up other believers in their walk with Jesus.” Love builds up.

#2 Your Liberty Is A Stumbling-block When It Leaves Out Love

(v9-13)

The real issue in chapter nine wasn't the meat. It was the behavior of those who had liberty to eat it.

Paul directly addressed the believers who insisted on exercising their liberty around others with a weaker conscience:

1 Corinthians 8:9 But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak.

A "stumbling-block" is serious. Your example can encourage or urge another believer to partake in a questionable practice for which he or she does not have a clear conscience. You can stumble them passively, without intending to.

1 Corinthians 8:10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols?

The Christian with liberty to eat the meat not only bought it in the marketplace but they went to festivals for the idols in their Temples. They could be seen there, in public, partaking of the feasts.

Paul will tell them (in chapter ten) that they were pushing their liberty to the limit and in some cases giving in to their carnal lusts. Not only do you become a stumbling-block to other believers but you also hinder your own progress with the Lord. Is it really worth it to publicly indulge your flesh in some questionable behavior?

1 Corinthians 8:11 And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?

"Perish" can be translated *ruined*. Here it has the meaning of being led into sin. Sin ruins them - either for a short time or for a lifetime.

First Corinthians 8:1-13
"Meat: It's what's for Sinners"

Those ruined are not the only ones sinning:

1 Corinthians 8:12 But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.

The believer who has liberty and insists on exercising it without considering its effect on others is actually sinning against them. What's worse, because they are in Christ **you are sinning directly against Jesus.**

1 Corinthians 8:13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Love limits liberty. It is the answer to *all* questions about questionable practices. What you ought to do for the sake of loving others takes priority over what you want to do and are free to do.

The next two chapters expand upon the question of questionable practices but the answer remains the same. Love one another.

As a church we apply this principle at our various functions by limiting certain liberties. Christians drink alcohol, they smoke, they dance, they watch 'R-rated' movies, they listen to all manner of secular music, etc., etc. In the near future I can foresee that Christians will be smoking marijuana, medical or legalized. We limit those things, and by that I mean we don't allow them, because of the potential for stumbling a brother or sister in Christ. We choose caution so as not to ruin someone else's life.

In our own homes and during our own more public activities we each must grab hold of this principle, that love limits liberty, and apply it to those questionable behaviors that we have claimed as our personal liberties.

Genuine Christian maturity lies in thinking more about others than I do about myself. It lies in personal sacrifice for the sake of seeing others built-up in their faith in Jesus Christ.

Be mature.

First Corinthians 8:1-13
"Meat: It's what's for Sinners"