

“Freedom’s Limits”

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Paul changes the question from “What can I do?” to “How can I love?”

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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Yes, or no?

To grasp today’s text and make it personal, I need your imagination in two steps. The second step will be a little more of a stretch than the first.

Step one: imagine that you love ice cream as much as your pastor. I was thinking that after the 150th anniversary I could get off ice cream for a while, but then there was all that leftover Moo Moo Chocolate. About the time we polished that off, I headed to Indianapolis this past Thursday through Saturday. Linda made my hotel reservation (so I can’t be held responsible for this), but when I checked in I realized my hotel was literally next door to Freddy’s, known for hamburgers and frozen custard. Imagine you’re as much of a hopeless addict to frozen treats as I am.

Step two: imagine there’s only one place in Hickory that produces ice cream. It’s the Buddhist temple on Sandy Ridge Road. They not only make the ice cream, they pray mantras over the entire process, and devote the product to Buddha with daily and constant prayers. They enjoy regular “ice cream feasts,” then sell the leftovers through the local grocery stores. The purpose of the ice cream business is to support the work and outreach of the temple.

Would you buy the ice cream? Yes, or no? If no, would you care if other Christians made a different choice? Would you eat it if someone else bought it? Would you try to urge others to boycott it? If yes, would you eat it privately or openly? If another Christian were offended by your eating, would you stop? This was the best modern parallel I could construct for 1 Corinthians 8.

As Paul begins this chapter, he introduces a new subject with the words “Now about...” Remember I said last week that 1 Corinthians is in two parts. Chapters 1-6 address what Paul had heard about the Corinthians. Beginning in chapter 7, he writes concerning what he had heard from the Corinthians. Chapter 7 was about marriage and sex. Now he changes the subject.

The new subject is one word in Greek, but it takes four words in English to translate it: “things sacrificed to idols.” By using this word, Paul is already displaying his bias. The Greeks in Corinth would have used a different word: “things sacrificed to a divinity.” Paul’s Jewish-Christian understanding is that what is being worshiped in these temples is not divine; it’s a substitute, a forgery, an idol.

The NIV says “food sacrificed to idols,” which, as we’ll see, is what he’s talking about. But “food” isn’t the literal translation. Just “things...”

I see four basic points Paul makes.

1. *Knowledge is tricky*

When I wrote the word “tricky” into my notes, I thought I was borrowing from Gollum in Lord of the Rings. I [looked it up](#), though, and realized the use of the word in British literature predates J. R. R. Tolkien by a couple of hundred years to Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

Paul apparently quotes the Corinthians’ letter to him as he begins this section. “We know that ‘We all possess knowledge’” (1). In the first century, and I suppose ever since, the accumulation of knowledge has been a strong value. It is for you, right? You only get about 70 or 80 years of life to go from a virtual blank slate at birth to accumulating the best and most relevant knowledge. It’s not enough time, trust me. Just about the time you think you’re really figuring things out, you retire and die.

“We all possess knowledge,” the Corinthians say to Paul in reference to “things sacrificed to idols.” Apparently this was a kind of proverb that people quoted that was designed to say all that needs to be said. Sort of like we might say, “To each his own.” Conversation over. Move on. It reminds me of something someone said to me at a UCC meeting on Friday, intending to be supportive: “We need to affirm conservatives because we need to affirm and welcome everyone.” My response was, “I appreciate that, but need you to know that if you want to understand Evangelical Christians well, we have a hard time with that statement. We don’t think what everyone believes is OK. But some of us believe we’re all better off if we do listen to one another respectfully.”

Paul’s response to the proverb “We all possess knowledge” sounds like this: “Well, yes and no. Knowledge is tricky.” He offers three quips of his own:

First, *“But knowledge puffs up while love builds up.”* The more you know, the more the risk of pride. I’ll never forget moving from my freshman year to my sophomore year of Bible college, thinking I was really starting to get it. Then someone – maybe a professor? – told us the meaning of the word “sophomore” – “wise fool.” You’ve gained just enough knowledge to be dangerous. We’re all sophomores in life.

Paul’s second proverb: *“Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know”* (2). Someone quoted Dr. Phil in my Bible study this past Thursday: “You don’t know what you don’t know.” While it’s a bit risky quoting Dr. Phil as a parallel to the Apostle Paul, that’s exactly what Paul is saying.

His third proverb: *“But whoever loves God is known by God”* (3). This reminds me of psychiatrist Curt Thompson’s visit to Corinth a few years ago. Our greatest, deepest longing is to be known. The truth is that the accumulation of knowledge doesn’t really fulfill the soul. It doesn’t give life meaning. The more you learn, the more you realize there’s so much more to know and you’ll never master it in this life. But when you pursue a love bond with God, you realize he knows you perfectly and intimately, and your soul is at peace.

2. Theology is essential

Now Paul explains why the statement “We all possess knowledge” is only a partial truth. The confusion is that some people think they “know” things that aren’t true. Some people actually believe there are many gods. So let’s start here, Paul says: *“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’”* (4).

Not all theology is true or good. Paul seems to make a concession for the sake of argument: *“For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’)”* (5).

Paul is saying, “Let’s not feel like at this moment we have to repair everyone’s false theology, let’s focus on ours.” He continues: *“...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”* (6).

This is powerful, not only for its reaffirmation of the Jewish shema, “Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one,” but for its inclusion in the same sentence Jesus Christ as Lord – the Greek word for Yahweh. There is one God, Paul says, and when we talk about Jesus, we’re talking about that one God.

3. Food is non-essential

Knowing there is one God helps, right? If those so-called gods are really nothing, why are we worried about food that has been offered to a nothing? “Nothing”

can't taint food. As Paul says, *"But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled"* (7).

His conclusion, then, is powerful: *"But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do"* (8). We would say that we know there are foods that are better than others, but nutrition is not Paul's topic. His topic is whether eating certain foods, even foods which for some are tainted, make you more or less holy or godly or better than those who make a different choice. His answer is a resounding No!

So...it doesn't matter whether you eat those foods or not, right? You're free to make your own choice, right? No one else's mores should affect yours, right? Don't let anyone restrict your freedom, right? No, no, no. Wrong!

4. Freedom has limits

Remember where Paul started. His first response to "We all possess knowledge" was "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." He's been really increasing, or at least reaffirming, their knowledge. Paul's not anti-knowledge. He's concerned that knowledge not displace or dilute love.

Not everyone knows that because there is only one God, offering food to false gods doesn't taint the food. Ingesting that food doesn't mean you ingest idolatry. Nothing changed biochemically about the food when it was placed on the idol of a nothing-god. You're free to eat.

So far, Paul has made the "yes" case convincingly. Now he makes the "no" case.

You're also free not to eat. Why would you not eat the ice cream manufactured by the Buddhists, or the food offered to Greek gods? Let me warn you. Paul's answer to that question assaults fundamental American ideas. If you haven't thought about it the way he writes about it, you may not like what he says.

Paul continues: *"Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak"* (9). Pause on "stumbling block." I don't know how common that word is in your everyday world, but the Apostle Paul likes it. Its meaning is quite literal. It's the curb you trip over when you're not looking. It's the toddler's truck left in the middle of the living room floor. It's whatever trips and sends you sprawling. Paul says the exercise of your "rights" (which I think he's using synonymously with "freedoms") may trip up "the weak."

Who are "the weak"? Paul seems to be saying they are those who need rules. They have a sensitive conscience and really care about doing what's right. If they diet, they do better with calorie charts and fit bits. They believe God is watching everything

they do and they want to do it right. They have sensitive consciences and are prone to carry guilt when their consciences are violated. Boundaries are so important to them, they only associate with people who share their scruples.

In what sense might you be their “stumbling block”? Paul continues, *“For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols?”* (10).

Sometimes a sin is sin to everybody, like “Don’t commit adultery.” Other areas are conscience-driven. We call them gray areas. Something may truly not be sin to you but it’s sin to someone else. The question is not even whether God is looking down from heaven saying, “That’s sin.” It’s going to function like sin in that person’s life. It’s going to create guilt and shame and as a result cut them off from God and others.

If that person eats because you ate, your conscience might be clean but theirs may be deeply troubled. Paul gives the result: *“So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge”* (11). Was that ice cream worth it?

Even though initially you felt free to eat and it didn’t bother your conscience and so wasn’t sin for you, *“When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ”* (12). That’s how important this is.

At this point, Paul concludes with his own personal practice: *“Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall”* (13). The next three chapters are a remarkable expansion of this principle – what it means to give up one’s personal freedom for the sake of others.

Change the question

Since the ice cream in Hickory is not actually manufactured by the Buddhist temple, what are the issues we deal with where Christians today disagree about what’s right? Let me mention a few: the use of alcohol, involvement in politics on one side or the other, politics in the church, support of this President or that, observance of the Sabbath or Lord’s Day – including shopping, chores, and church attendance, travel sports and their impact on church involvement, raising children, Christian schools, corporal punishment, guns and gun rights, what kinds of film and art are appropriate for Christians, environmental issues and your carbon footprint, what constitutes good stewardship v. what represents selfishness and greed, a whole range of issues about sex, marriage, and divorce, abortion, devotional practices, fraternities and sororities in college and beyond, Masonic lodges and affiliations, appropriate clothing and modesty, tattoos, and whatever else you and your spouse argued about this week.

If I went too fast for you to process all of them, that was my intent. You may say that in some of those areas the Bible is very clear, and Christians should be as clear as

the Bible. The “No” group among Paul’s readers would have said the Bible is very clear about eating the wrong food, or about eating food sacrificed to idols.

The Bible is not always equally clear on every issue to everyone who believes in Jesus. Maybe because they’re weak or strong. Maybe because they’re immature or mature. Maybe because of their own past or their friendships and family.

Paul wants to change the question from “What can I do?” to “How can I love?” It’s not about freedoms or rules. It’s about impact – on believers and unbelievers.

As I said earlier, Paul continues on this theme in chapters 8, 9, and 10. The best way to conclude my sermon is to quote from the end of chapter 10. This sums it all.

Looking at it one way, you could say, “Anything goes. Because of God’s immense generosity and grace, we don’t have to dissect and scrutinize every action to see if it will pass muster.” But the point is not to just get by. We want to live well, but our foremost efforts should be to help others live well.

With that as a base to work from, common sense can take you the rest of the way. Eat anything sold at the butcher shop, for instance; you don’t have to run an “idolatry test” on every item. “The earth,” after all, “is God’s, and everything in it.” That “everything” certainly includes the leg of lamb in the butcher shop. If a nonbeliever invites you to dinner and you feel like going, go ahead and enjoy yourself; eat everything placed before you. It would be both bad manners and bad spirituality to cross-examine your host on the ethical purity of each course as it is served. On the other hand, if he goes out of his way to tell you that this or that was sacrificed to god or goddess so-and-so, you should pass. Even though you may be indifferent as to where it came from, he isn’t, and you don’t want to send mixed messages to him about who you are worshiping.

But, except for these special cases, I’m not going to walk around on eggshells worrying about what small-minded people might say; I’m going to stride free and easy, knowing what our large-minded Master has already said. If I eat what is served to me, grateful to God for what is on the table, how can I worry about what someone will say? I thanked God for it and he blessed it!

So eat your meals heartily, not worrying about what others say about you— you’re eating to God’s glory, after all, not to please them. As a matter of fact, do everything that way, heartily and freely to God’s glory. At the same time, don’t be callous in your exercise of freedom, thoughtlessly stepping on the toes of those who aren’t as free as you are. I try my best to be considerate of everyone’s feelings in all these matters; I hope you will be, too. (1 Corinthians 10:23-33, *The Message*)

Amen, Paul!