

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

Lest I Make My Brother Stumble

March 1st, 2015

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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(Note to Worship Leader: This morning we will have the Scripture passage read by a member of the worship team immediately prior to the message. It must be read in the ESV. Please work with the reader to ensure that all words can be pronounced. When they conclude the reading I will come up and begin the sermon. The full text is printed below for word count purposes only – I will not be re-reading it.)

¹ Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. ² If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

⁴ Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

⁷ However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸ Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹ But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? ¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹² Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (1 Corinthians 8:1–13 ESV)

Introduction:

Good morning! I'd like you have your Bibles open to the Scripture that was just read. That's on page 956 in your pew Bible. This message will make more sense with a Bible open in front of you. Put your finger on chapter 8:1. I want you to notice that Paul is starting a new conversation at this point in the letter. He says: "Now concerning..." and he begins to talk about something else. We've just finished 3 chapters on sex. Look backwards from 8:1. In chapter 7 we were talking about marriage. Marriage is good, but singleness can be good too if you have the gift. We see as well that divorce is bad but in a few cases might be unavoidable because of sin. Looking back a little further into chapter 6 we see that he was talking there about sexual immorality. Sleeping with prostitutes is not good. Homosexuality is not good we see in verse 9. Go back a little further into chapter 5 and we see that incest is also not good. So marriage is good, singleness can be good if you have the gift, divorce is bad, but sometimes unavoidable, sex with prostitutes is always bad, as is homosexuality and incest. That's a quick summary of the last 3 chapters. Paul has been talking about GLORIFYING GOD IN OUR BODIES. God cares about who you are IN THE DARK! He cares about what you do with your body and with your nearest neighbours. He cares about that stuff. Christianity is not just about believing some things in your heart – it is about that – but it is also about living a certain way in your body. For three chapters Paul has been talking to us about glorifying God in our bodies and in our bedrooms and now there is a change of topic. Now he begins to talk about glorifying God in the church and in our worship. Paul begins with a topic that many of us today might be tempted to think is completely irrelevant to our modern day lives. He talks about idolatry and eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols.

Look at your Bibles again. Put your finger on 8:1 and now this time let's look forward; I want you to see the contours of this first new argument that Paul begins to make. In chapter 8 he talks about eating food sacrificed to idols – we'll come back to that in just a minute. Then in chapter 9 he makes a personal illustration about how he himself has learned to live INSIDE of the boundary of his permission, then in chapter 10 he makes a Biblical illustration from the Old Testament to show what idolatry is really a big deal and then look at where he brings this in for a landing. Look at 10:31-32; he says:

³¹ So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. ³² Give no offense to Jews or to

Greeks or to the church of God (1 Corinthians 10:31–32 ESV)

In verse 32 there Paul uses the negative form of the same noun that is translated back in 8:9 as “stumbling block”. This is the end of the argument that he begins back in chapter 8. He is saying: “When you are wrestling with these complicated moral and spiritual decisions, here are the most important things to keep in mind. The glory of God and the faith of other people. Whatever you decide to do, don’t rob God of glory and don’t put a stumbling block in front of other people. That’s what you need to be thinking about when you’re making these decisions.”

Let’s go back to 8:1. There is value in going through this argument slowly in order to understand these considerations and guidelines that Paul proposes. So I want to very briefly explain the specific context in Corinth, highlight Paul’s counsel to them and then spend a fair bit of time at the end talking about how to apply that counsel in our lives and situations. Let’s begin with the specific context into which Paul gave this particular counsel.

The Context In Corinth And The Counsel Of Paul:

Look at verse 1:

Now concerning food offered to idols... (1 Corinthians 8:1 ESV)

Back in Paul’s day in Roman Corinth almost all meat would have been associated with idol worship at one time or another. The most common place to eat meat would be at a cultural festival in one of the large eating areas associated with one of the pagan temples. We need to remember that in the ancient world people did not eat meat as regularly as they do today. Even in the Bible we see that most of the time people were eating meat it was in the context of a religious festival or observation. When you brought a lamb to the temple to sacrifice, a portion was burned on the alter, a portion went to the priest and a portion went to you and you ate that portion with your family and it was a pretty big deal. Same thing in Roman society. Almost every time you ate meat it was associated in some way with the Roman gods.

Now, here is where this story gets a little bit complicated. The Christians who were saved out of Roman paganism had come to understand that there really was no such thing as a Roman god.

Paul had taught them that. Paul told the truth about that stuff all the time. He says later in this same argument:

No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. (1 Corinthians 10:20 ESV)

There is no such thing as a Roman god! That is just a silly trick by demons to lock people into patterns of stupid and silly. There is nothing to this, plain and simple. There is no such thing as “pagan cootytitis” on your hunk of meat because there is no pagan god to GIVE you COOTY-IT IS. Your meat is not contaminated. Now, many Corinthians KNOW THIS. They have that knowledge. They KNOW that there is nothing going on here. But listen to what Paul says next:

¹ Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. ² If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. (1 Corinthians 8:1–2 ESV)

Knowledge isn’t sufficient for making these sorts of decisions, and P.S., you don’t know as much as you think you know. You know that what you are doing isn’t a sin – technically you are right. If there is no Roman god then you can’t actually commit idolatry by eating meat in his temple or buying meat at his market. But. There is another issue to consider:

¹⁰ For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? ¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹² Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (1 Corinthians 8:10–13 ESV)

You forgot to think about your brother. He doesn’t know what you know. He isn’t there yet. He sees you living large with your Christian liberty and so maybe he thinks that he should just do it too, since you’re doing it – but here’s the thing. He doesn’t feel good about doing it. He hasn’t thought his way through it so in doing it – because you did it – he is actually violating his own conscience and learning how to disobey God. You are causing your brother to sin and that is a big sin. It’s one of the biggest sins, it just isn’t the sin you were thinking about.

That’s the situation in Corinth and if we look at the argument as a whole it seems that Paul’s counsel to them was pretty simple. He says: “When you are making complex moral and spiritual decisions, you need more than knowledge. You need that”; Paul never disparages knowledge; he just says, “you need to more than the FACT that there is only one true God and therefore all the

gods of the pagans are demons and delusions – you are right in knowing that – but, that’s not enough to live as a Christian should live. You also need to pay attention to the law of love and to the law of glory.”

You see the moral law is like the outer fence – cross this line and you will die! But Jesus said that his followers would not concern themselves a great deal with the outer fence, they would concern themselves with the holy centre. Jesus said that remember? He said:

²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17–20 ESV)

Do you hear that? Jesus said that. He said that heaven is not for people who tear down the outer wall in the name of Christian liberty. Heaven is for people who love the law and who have learned by God’s grace to live and to LOVE TO LIVE at the holy centre of God’s will. It isn’t enough to avoid the fences, you need to find and love the centre. That’s where God is glorified and people are protected. Paul wants to help us find that place, and so he gives us two principles, two “inner laws” you might say that can help get us there. We see that in his conclusion in chapter 10:31-32:

³¹ So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. ³² Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God (1 Corinthians 10:31–32 ESV)

I want to spend our last several minutes talking about those inner laws which I’ve called the law of glory and the law of love. We’ll talk about the law of love first.

What Is The Law Of Love?

I think the text clearly indicates that the Law of Love begins with:

i. The consideration of others

We see that in verse 32 of chapter 10 which we just read, but we also saw it back in chapter 8 at verse 10:

¹⁰For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? ¹¹And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. (1 Corinthians 8:10–11 ESV)

The law of love means asking more than “What is permissible for me?”; the law of love necessitates FIRST asking: “What is helpful for my brother?” Did you ask that, the last time you made a complicated moral decision? Eating meat sacrificed to idols isn't a common problem nowadays – it is in Asia for the believers there – but this particular application is not really our biggest problem today is it? But we make all kinds of complicated decisions every day and when we make those decisions, Paul says, we need to be thinking about our Christian brothers and sisters. There is more to think about than just “Is this permissible for me?” There is the growth and development and faith of your brother.

Let me give you an example and I really hesitate to do this. I am not making a moral pronouncement on this issue one way or the other I am just using this decision to illustrate the point. Many younger, hipper, men in particular, in the new Evangelical revival associated with groups like T4G and The Gospel Coalition and the new Calvinism and all of that are very aware that their parents were often very legalistic about certain moral issues like movies and alcohol. Everyone agrees that somewhere in the 70's the average Evangelical lost the Gospel but managed to hold onto the rulebook and we all know that rules without Gospel kill joy, destroy faith and embitter children against Christianity. That's all true. That's GOOD KNOWLEDGE. But in that knowledge there are many younger Evangelical men particularly, who display this knowledge by doing things that their parents and grandparents would consider horribly sinful. They drink whiskey and smoke pipes and watch “cinema” and they talk about “every square inch” and they read their Bibles and quote Calvin and everything is great. Except its not great because they have a lot of influence over younger Christians, teenagers for example and maybe a 17 year old kid sees his goatee sporting, whiskey drinking, Calvin quoting youth pastor and he thinks to himself: “I'd like to be liberated like he is liberated. I'd like to be mature like he is mature” and maybe he does something he isn't yet convinced in his soul he should be doing but he does it because his hipster youth pastor is doing it. What just happened there? That young man is learning how to ignore his conscience and he is carving paths and developing habits that MAY make it easier for him to fall away into future ruin. Now, is the slightly older young man with the goatee and the smoking jacket and the complete set of Calvin commentaries SINNING when he drinks the whiskey? Answer – no. No. There is no verse in the Bible that says that

drinking alcohol is a sin. There isn't. BUT. He is sinning – his sin isn't drinking the whiskey – his sin is being careless with the soul of his younger brother. His sin is being puffed up with pride in his knowledge and lacking in love for others. He did sin. It just wasn't the sin he was thinking about.

The law of love means asking BETTER questions than “Is this permissible for me”. It begins with asking: “Will this be helpful or harmful to my brother or to my sister in the Lord?”

The law of love therefore also necessarily involves:

ii. The limitation of the self

Now I'm going to be very brief here because Paul illustrates this principle in chapter 9. In chapter 9 Paul talks about how he has learned to live with LESS THAN HE DESERVES. That's what chapter 9 is about and we are going to talk about that next Sunday so for now we'll just say that to live by the law of love you need to think more about others and you need to think less about yourself and you need to learn to be content with less than you deserve. Less justice that you deserve – you don't always need closure. Sometimes it might be better for your sister or your brother to just let it pass. Less recognition than you deserve. Sometimes it might be better if you weren't thanked and recognized for everything you do – you deserve it but you receiving it might wound, threaten or intimidate others. The limitation of the self often involves learning to live with less pleasure than you deserve. Sometimes; often times, for the sake of a brother, you might need to enjoy less than you have the right to enjoy. Now we will never condemn you if you live to the limit of your liberty, but for the sake of the body and for the weaker members of it, it might be better, it might be more loving if you could learn to be content with LESS than you deserve. We'll talk more about that next week.

What Is The Law Of Glory?

Secondly, Paul says, we need to think about the Law of Glory. The most important thing in all of this is God's glory. That has been the main theme now for 5 chapters – you could probably make the argument that it has been the main theme of the whole letter. Glorify God in your bodies, Paul said for 3 chapters and now he says: Glorify God in your church and in your worship.

Sitting in a pagan temple eating bar-b-q might not technically qualify as idolatry. After all, the pagan god doesn't actually exist. BUT. It sure makes it look like you are not a follower of Yahweh. Your exercise of liberty certainly does not accentuate the glory of God – it does not seem to tell a story about your undivided loyalty to God. It looks like you have a divided heart. It looks like you care more about your own appetite than you do about the fame of God's Name. That's a glory issue and you should have been more sensitive to those concerns, Paul says.

In light of that, obviously, we want to end by spending some time thinking about the law of glory. The law of glory is characterized, first of all by:

i. A concern to express a singular devotion to God

Look at chapter 8:6:

yet for us **there is one God**, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and **one Lord, Jesus Christ**, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Corinthians 8:6 ESV)

Notice the emphasis on the singular nature of God and the singular nature of Jesus Christ as Lord. That is the main project here; that is the main concern of God's redemptive work in the universe. That's the big picture theme! In Paul's Letter To The Ephesians that we studied at length not too long ago Paul made it clear that this is the goal towards which all the universe is heading:

⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, **to unite all things in him**, things in heaven and things on earth. (Ephesians 1:7–10 ESV)

The plan is for everything in the universe to be UNITED IN CHRIST, SINGULAR IN DEVOTION to the Son who himself, delights in submission to the Father. That is the POINT of our redemption. What then – IN THE WORLD – are you doing eating bar-b-q in a pagan temple? Your whole life is supposed to tell a story about your increasing, singular, all consuming devotion to Jesus Christ – that's a hard story to tell between mouthfuls of lamb burger at the pagan temple. Right? That's where Paul is driving with this. Now, is it technically idolatrous? No, but it is incredibly stupid. It is stupid, it is counter productive and it robs God of glory and that my friend – is the biggest sin of all. So it may not be technically idolatry but it is 6 kinds of sinful. Don't do it. The law of glory is fundamentally concerned with a desire to EXPRESS in

our bodies, in our speech in our every thought and deed our SINGULAR devotion to the glory of God in Jesus Christ. And everything we do speaks or does not speak toward that end. It matters for the glory of God.

Secondly, and lastly, the law of glory is characterized by:

ii. A concern to display God's power, goodness and grace

Christians are concerned to SHOW the world the overcoming POWER of God's GRACE and the soul satisfying GOODNESS of God's character and will. That's what we want to do. That's what Jesus TOLD US TO DO. He said:

let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:16 ESV)

Listen to me very carefully: the best argument for the glory of God is the testimony of a changed life. That is the one argument our culture cannot shout down. The Christian who is concerned for the glory of God has two weapons in his hand. He has conflict and he has contrast. The Bible talks a lot about conflict – we're told to contend for the faith, we're told to fight the good fight but the Bible also talks a lot about CONTRAST. This is the one we forget about! We are so eager to be LIKE THE WORLD! We are so eager to sing their songs and watch their movies and enjoy their amusements and we tell ourselves that this will make us better soul winners but Paul never says anything about the weapon of accommodation. Jesus never says anything about the weapon of imitation – the Bible knows nothing of that strategy – we just made that up! The Bible talks about conflict and the Bible talks about contrast. When your life tells the story of God's overcoming grace in the life of a wretched sinner – that CONTRAST resounds to the glory of God in Christ. People will see your good works, they will see your good marriage, they will see your healthy family, they will see your contented living, they will see your generosity, they will see your selfless service AND THEY WILL GLORIFY your father who is in heaven.

Conclusion:

So when you make decisions about how you will live and what you will do you need to think

about more than the limits of your permission. Paul is telling us that Christians ask WAY BETTER QUESTIONS THAN THAT. They ask: Does this activity glorify God? And does this activity protect God's people? If it doesn't, then, even if I can do it, I won't. That's what it means to THINK and DECIDE like a Christian! That's what it means to be TRANSFORMED by the renewing of your minds that you might prove what the will of God is; that which is good, acceptable and perfect. That's your memory verse from February, and this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Let's pray together.