

Love Tastes Better Than Steak

1 Corinthians 8:7-13

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We have our Connection Fair kicking off today so we are aiming for a little shorter message than normal to give you time to spend in the Commons. This means we need to get right to it. There will be no interesting or helpful introduction to draw you into the message. In spite of what you are so accustomed to, I am banning all attempts at wit and humor to win you over to listening to the rest of the message. There will be none of that and some of you think there never is.

We continue our series in 1 Corinthians and we are in chapter 8. I am going to read verses 7-8 in a moment. Let's refresh a previous message. In chapter 8, Paul addresses another question the Corinthian Christians had: *is it okay to eat meat sold in the marketplace that previously had been offered to a pagan god?* This is not an issue today, but how to deal with points of disagreement in the church is a great need. One group said, *Idols aren't anything so idol meat is fine.* The other group said, *We don't think it's right.*

In verses 1-6, Paul tacitly agrees doctrinally with the group that said it was okay to eat meat offered to idols, but that is not his primary concern. His main concern was their attitude. They were "puffed up" (verse 1) with the freedom their right doctrine gave them. They looked down on those who weren't quite there yet in their knowledge, conscience, and personal freedom. Love for one another is Paul's main concern.

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. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. (1 Corinthians 8:7-13)

If you have been around a church for any length of time, then you know there are any numbers of lifestyle choices for Christians that the Bible does not specifically say are right or wrong. Many of them are matters of wisdom and maturity. These gray areas easily become battlegrounds for Christians.

The issue at hand here is a safe example to discuss because in our culture it is a non-issue. *Can Christians eat meat once offered to an idol in worship?* Some said, *An idol is nothing, so food offered to it is fine* (this is Paul's position - verse 8 - God doesn't care about food issues like this). Others who came out of the excesses of pagan worship wanted nothing to do with it. Therefore, in the church some said, *No big deal and Costco has idol meat on sale!* Others said, *No good Christian would ever eat that stuff!* In light of the grand story of redemption, how important is meat offered to an idol? It's a minor thing. It becomes a big thing when your conscience is bothered by it. This is a weak spot. Let's identify who is who here.

Who is the Brother (or Sister) with the “Weak Conscience”?

A Christian who has not personally embraced freedom in an area of potential “liberty.”

However, not all possess this knowledge... (Verse 7) or not all have freedom of conscience to eat. Let’s identify our conscience. ***Our conscience is the inward moral compass by which we evaluate ourselves.*** Romans 2:15 tells us all people have one. Mankind’s inward moral compass was damaged in the Fall, so it doesn’t give us perfect moral readings, but it still can find the general moral north and south poles in decisions. After salvation, a Christian’s conscience is part of our transformation as we increasingly understand God’s will and what we are free to enjoy in this good creation.

However, good Christians can come to different conclusions on things. These are known as areas of Christian liberty. Disputable matters. We are not talking about clear moral categories. Robbing a bank is not a Christian liberty issue. These are personal lifestyle decisions we make as Christians where God has not given us clear direction or where faithful interpretation of Scripture allows for good Christians to come to different conclusions.

The weaker brother is the one whose conscience keeps him from participating freely in something that the Bible doesn’t limit for all Christians. In 1 Corinthians 8, it is whether Christians can eat meat offered to idols, but there are many, many areas like this. If I started giving examples, some might get all agitated on their hot button issue and miss the point of this message.

Notice that the person with the weak conscience is the one with limitations. Growing up, I thought the person with the longest list of convictions on this stuff was more spiritual. Not so. An author named Joe Aldrich wrote a book years ago entitled, *Lifestyle Evangelism*, in which he explains four types of Christians; two in the weaker brother category and two in the strong or mature category. Let’s start with the **professional weaker brother**. This is the dogmatic, ready-to-go-nuclear-no-matter-what-the-damage weaker brother who is demanding that all bow to his position. Perhaps you know someone like this. Maybe you used to be one. Maybe you still are! This person has no sense of theological scale. They are ready to go to the mat on any and every issue. Everyone has to agree with him. This kind of weaker brother is not to be placated; he is to be rebuked because he is a control freak and behind the rhetoric is great spiritual insecurity. *Do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.* (Romans 14:16)

This is not the kind of person Paul has in view here. Paul is describing the **susceptible weaker brother**. This is a tender, conscientious Christian whose has not yet matured in their biblical knowledge or has not yet conformed their conscience to what their mind knows to be true. They are easily influenced and might be influenced to go against what their conscience allows. They are not ready to experience all the freedom we have in Christ. Where does the weakness come from?

They are influenced by their pre-Christian lifestyle, past teaching or teachers, lifestyle example of a spiritually significant person, or other conscience shaping experiences.

Here in chapter 8, it is clearly their pre-Christian lifestyle. These people had grown up worshipping the goddess Aphrodite in the massive temple at Corinth. That worship experience involved animal sacrifice and immorality with the temple prostitutes, male and

female. Their whole lives were dominated by this false religion. Then they hear the truth; this god is no god and there is no salvation to be found with Aphrodite or any other god in the Greek pantheon. Christ died on the cross for the sins of man so that mankind could be rescued from God's wrath and restored to His love with eternal life. These idol worshipping, meat offering Corinthians turned away from the false religion and embraced the truth found in Christ. It was a glorious and glad day for them.

Here's the thing. For some in the Corinthian church, those years of idol worship were so profound, that even after coming to faith in Christ, they struggled to get past the superstition of it. They just knew they didn't want anything to do with it ever again. For them, even the meat that had been offered there had some residual evil influence. To consider buying that meat or attending a dinner at the temple was hard to swallow even if in their minds they knew the temple was just stone and the idol just wood.

Their consciences remained weak because of their past lifestyle. This is similar to Christians who were alcoholics before they came to faith. They might not like to walk down the liquor aisle at Wal-mart even if it's the fastest way to the checkout. It bothers them. If you are saved out of pornography, your heart might fracture as you walk past the magazine rack. You get the idea. Often, what we are saved from is an area we feel the most conscientious about after salvation in a way that someone who doesn't come from that background doesn't feel.

There are other influences that create long-term conscience weak spots; the personal convictions of the person who discipled us are easily transferred to our conscience. Even after we grow in our knowledge, we are extra sensitive about them. I was talking with our seniors' class this week about these things. I had a woman in her 80s seek me out and say, "When I grew up in the 1930s, my mom refused to let us see movies on Sunday. All these years later, I'm still stuck 'cause my mom told me it was wrong!"

If you had Christian parents, their position on liberty issues is very influential and can create a lifelong reticence to go against it even if you've come to realize it was their preference, not God's. Not just parents, but anyone we looked up to spiritually in the past could have a profound influence on our consciences. Their positions, teachings, personal lifestyle choices become like the Bible to our conscience. When they are biblical, great! When they are personal preferences, now I will probably face awkward things in the future because my conscience will think one thing and my biblically maturing mind will come to a different conclusion. Many of you know what I am talking about.

Listen carefully, do not take what I just said as cause to go out and violate your conscience on some Christian liberty. That is the opposite of what I am saying.

For the weak to participate would violate their conscience, and therefore, it is sin to them.

- *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. (1 Corinthians 8:7)*
- *I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. (Romans 14:14)*
- *But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. (Romans 14:23)*

Our consciences are fallible. They can be wrong and tell us that something is displeasing to God even when it's not. However, if my conscience tells me it's wrong and I do it anyway, for me this is sin (Romans 14:14); not because of the morality of the activity itself, but because I have violated my conscience.

I have a friend who went to a very conservative Christian college famous for all its rules. He told me the most damaging thing about his experience there was that he got used to violating his conscience. There were so many rules, he was always breaking something and he got used to it. This is the double whammy of legalistic Christianity. It entrenches weak conscience Christianity into the culture of the church and then burdens it with more man-made rules than can possibly be followed. When your conscience gets used to violating the non-essentials, it feels the same to violate the ones that matter to God. That's one reason so many kids from fundamentalist backgrounds struggle so much. Long ago they got comfortable violating their consciences.

For the conscientious weaker brother, the stronger brother's doctrinal argument is compelling, but he can't get himself to the place where it doesn't matter to him anymore. That's how you can know if you've arrived at maturity in an area of Christian liberty; it's not a big deal to you. Joe Aldrich also describes two kinds of stronger conscience brothers. The one he calls **the non-participating mature brother**. This is the Christian who knows in his mind and conscience that something is acceptable to God; he just chooses not to participate. It doesn't bother him that other Christians do and there's not a drop of judgmentalism in him towards them. The other stronger brother is **the participating mature brother**. His mind and conscience give him the green light and he participates freely and buys the idol meat in the market and eats it to the glory of God.

On any Christian liberty issue, there are those four types. **The professional weaker brother** who thinks it's wrong and is sharply critical of anyone who disagrees. **The susceptible weaker brother** who is tender and easily swayed. **The Non-participating mature brother** who thinks, *Fine if you do; for now, I don't*. And **the participating mature brother** who participates freely.

We would expect him to challenge the weak, but Paul doesn't tell the weak to grow up; his words are for the strong:

But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 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? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (Verses 9-13)

We will spend more time on this in a future message. The real issue at Corinth wasn't eating idol meat; it was attitude. The strong were flaunting their freedom to the weak. This was creating a potential "stumbling block" to the weak. The word literally means, "to put an obstacle before someone." Stumbling block doesn't mean upsetting. The professional weaker brother is offended at everything. This has in view the susceptible weaker brother who sees the stronger brother eating meat offered to an idol, and is emboldened to do it too, even though his conscience can't handle it and tells him he is doing something wrong. Let me do a quick outline of verses 9-13 that we will deal with in the future.

Who are the “Strong” and what are they to do and not do?

Don't be a Stumbling Block (Verse 9)...

- By brashly living out your freedom before them (Verse 10)
- By urging what their conscience doesn't allow (Verse 10)

Do...

- See the issue from God's perspective (Verse 8)
- Love your brother enough to limit your freedom, if necessary, for his sake (Verse 13)

Let me illustrate this. It's not a perfect analogy, so don't get tripped up on the details. Let's just say that right now someone bursts into the room and says, *A big truck from Horseshoe Casino just pulled up. It's a long story but they have 1000 catered prime rib meals from their restaurant at the Casino and they were wondering if we would like them.*

Imagine the conversation we could have deciding what to do. No doubt we would quickly have two groups. Some would say, "Where's the fork and knife? Let's dig in!" Those would be the participating mature brothers (or possibly the gluttons of the church). Another group would be identifiable, "Absolutely not!" They might come to this conclusion for different reasons. Some grew up in churches that taught clearly that when a casino shows up at a church with catered prime rib, godly churches will always say no! Another reason could be personal background. This person says, "Everyone, before I was a Christian, my life spiraled out of control and a big part of that was my participation at the casinos. I was controlled by the greed and materialism. When Christ saved me, He saved me from that and I'll tell you right now, I don't want anything to do with it. I don't feel right about it."

Now things get quiet and we realize there are deeper issues than a free meal and a good steak. In that moment, is the real issue the prime rib? The real issue is love. Do you see how contrary to the gospel of a self-sacrificing Savior it would be for a strong conscience brother to say, "I don't care about your past; I'm going back there and getting me some good casino prime rib."?

The weaker brother can't, in that moment, change his conscience, but the stronger brother can, in his love, change his lifestyle and be mature enough to see that there are more important things than meat. Like Love. Unity. And the church's testimony to the community.

God's vertical love for us must translate into horizontal love for our brother, even one whose conscience is unbiblically tender. What if the weaker brother isn't around? How is this sin against our brother and Christ? I have lots more to say in a future message. But next week, *It's All About Him!*

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