

A Strong Kind of Love

1 Corinthians 8:9-13

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Before we get into God's Word together, I just want to say how excited I am about our Small Group study through the doctrines of our church. A few years ago, we spent mega-hours and tons of effort writing the Statement of Faith. The vision was for our Doctrinal Statement to be a visible and vibrant part of our church. We use it occasionally in our worship services and I quote it in my messages. What we believe is foundational to everything we do. Every so often we produce in house a Small Group curriculum that we want to disciple the whole church through. Pastor Brad has done an excellent job with this and we are excited about the good fruit this will bear throughout the church. Kudos to Pastor Brad.

We return to 1 Corinthians 8 this week and the whole matter of Christian liberty. Christian liberty deals with personal lifestyle choices in areas that God's Word does not make clear. Are they appropriate for a Christian or not? Just in case you are new to Christianity or maybe just checking it out this weekend, the Bible tells us all that we need to know about how to have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This is not a matter of living good enough to earn it; it is utterly by faith in what Jesus did by dying on the cross in our place. Don't be confused by today's message.

Our concern for how we live is not to earn salvation, but to show it. It is kind of like how you would be horrified if your child thought he had to live right to earn his way into your family. But if he wants to live well because he bears your family name, that makes you proud. We care about pleasing God because by faith we are His children and we bear His name. We want to please Him. Perhaps the hardest of all areas to please God is related to His command that we love one another. Why? In the words of one book title, *Everyone's Normal Until You Get to Know Them*. We'd like to think that everyone sees everything the way we do. Then we find out that nobody agrees 100% of the time and we often don't even agree with ourselves. We change over time.

The Corinthians were having a little war in the church over whether or not it was appropriate for a Corinthian Christian to eat meat that had previously been offered in worship to the idol goddess Aphrodite. Some said, *An idol isn't anything, so no problem, let's eat*. Others said, *Christ saved me from idol worship; I don't want to be near anything associated with it*. This obviously isn't an issue today, which is why it's so helpful to talk about because it gives us a safe paradigm to apply to the lifestyle choices we may hold in disagreement.

Let me make something very clear. We are not talking about moral matters that God has made clear or the obvious application of those moral commands. I was talking with a woman this week. She said, *"I am so glad you have been teaching on the Christian liberty stuff. I have a Christian friend who is excited. She has recently been going into hotels that offer free breakfasts to their guests. She's not a guest, but she walks in, eats, and leaves. She thinks this is great and is a Christian liberty issue."* That is not a Christian liberty issue; that is stealing! Christian liberty issues are gray areas where there are no clear directives from God and where culture, wisdom, and maturity create differing opinions. Joe Aldrich helps us with four categories of Christians on Christian liberty issues:

- *Professional Weaker Brother* – You are not a good Christian if you participate
- *Susceptible Weaker Brother* – I am not a good Christian if I participate
- *Nonparticipating Mature Brother* – Godly Christians can participate, but I choose not to
- *Participating Mature Brother* – Christians are free to participate and I do

Let me read 8:7-13 and keep in view the Susceptible Weaker Brother and the Participating Mature Brother.

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. 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. (1 Corinthians 8:7-13)

The scenario that Paul describes is one that was going on in the church. In the area of eating meat offered to an idol, those whose consciences allowed them to eat it were flaunting their freedom before the weak. The participating mature brother was exercising his liberated conscience in front of the susceptible weaker brother. The weaker brother's conscience didn't allow him to participate. For him it is sin to participate because it is always wrong to violate your conscience. If your conscience tells you it's wrong, for you it is wrong.

The weaker brother can be influenced by the participating stronger brother to do what his conscience says is wrong. This is what Paul means with "defiled" in verse 7, "stumbling block" in verse 9, and "destroyed" in verse 11. Where does the problem lie? Not so much with the weaker conscience Christian, although we could wish his conscience was more mature. The problem lies with the strong.

What the Strong are NOT to Do

Don't brashly live out your freedom before the weaker brother. (Verse 10)

Paul gives the likely scenario of the strong being seen in their freedom going to the temple for a meal. To the strong, it was just a meal. To the susceptible weak, this created within them great tension and a struggle between the example of the strong and the testimony of their conscience. Rather than being discreet, the strong didn't care and flaunted their freedom.

Can you hear the strong in the Corinthian church foyer after the service? *Frank, wasn't that steak at the temple awesome! That was some party. Are you and Lois going this Friday? I hope to see you there!* Meanwhile, there is a little huddle of weaker brothers listening and watching. The Professional Weaker Brother says, *Look at them reveling in their idol meat eating. The Pastor needs to do something about this!* That guy's wife says, *They weren't raised right. I just know our kids won't play with their kids. They might have leftovers of idol meat for lunch and feed that corrupting food to our precious little Jimmy.* And standing next to them listening is the person Paul has in view. The Susceptible Weaker Brother. He's not the hard-core, judgmental Professional Weaker Brother. He admires the stronger brother and wants to be like them but his conscience grips him at the thought of eating idol

meat with them. It just doesn't feel right. [The strong are not to flaunt freedom in sensitive areas.]

Don't urge by word or example what their conscience doesn't allow (Verse 10)

In describing this, I don't want to misrepresent the stronger faith believers. We should all want to be strong in faith and conscience and the freedom for what Christ has set us free (Galatians 5:1). This is no promotion of weak-faith Christianity. So if you listen to my example and think, *I'd like to be the one whispering bad things about the people eating idol meat*, you have more serious problems than you begin to realize.

However, there is another mistake to make here and this happens all the time. There is a kind of apparent conscience maturity that is actually a bondage and a weakness. Here's an example. Someone grows up in the home of parents who are of the weaker faith persuasion. Mom and Dad have conscience convictions that are more personal preferences than biblically supported morality. Often, weaker conscience Christians tend toward legalism because not only does it affirm their position, it says they are more spiritual because of it. The parents are sincere about it and engrain their weak-faith convictions into their kid. The kid grows up, becomes an adult Christian and in the process begins thinking through what his parents taught him. Somewhere along the way, he discovers that in some of these areas, Mom and Dad weren't quite biblical. The new adult has an epiphany, *Wait, Christians actually have freedom to participate! An idol is nothing and meat offered to it is no big deal! Mom, Dad, you are wrong! All these years, you were wrong! God has anointed me to be the one to point this out to you!*

What often happens is that in finding freedom, there is a flaunting and air of superior spirituality that he now can eat idol meat. *Look at me, I am eating idol meat and it tastes good! Look at me! Look at how spiritual I am. I am actually putting idol meat in my mouth. Wow. I feel so close to God now!* Now he flaunts it. When he's out with his parents, he makes sure to order from the idol meat portion of the menu. In choosing a church, he's looking for a church that is really into eating idol meat. The conscience is right, but the attitude is totally wrong. He is enslaved to his freedom much like his parents were enslaved to their lack of freedom.

God's in heaven thinking, I don't care about idol meat but that attitude has got to go. Why? *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.* (Romans 14:17) The real place of maturity on Christian liberty issues is when these things don't matter to us one way or the other and are way less important to us than the things that do matter to God like righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

I had better be certain that whatever I am doing has a direct connection to truth. I had better be sure that the supreme worth of Jesus is my starting, continuing and ending value. I had better be sure that my "freedom in Christ" is not of my own manufacture, for if it is, I am still a legalist. I have simply moved from negative legalism (I don't do this; therefore, I'm okay) to affirmative legalism (I can do this; therefore, I am okay). (Harold Best)

Idol meat issues come and go. Much of it is cultural. Pastor Gary told me recently that the issues have totally changed during his 40 years of ministry. The gray areas are different on the east coast then on the west coast. Go to a church in Europe or Africa and the liberty issues are entirely different. Real spirituality is much deeper than outward lifestyle choices in gray areas. Real godliness gets past the "I do" or "I don't" to what would be best for my brother or sister in Christ; best for missional living; best for the kingdom of God.

What the Strong are to Do

Realize what is at stake (Verses 11-12)

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.

This is shocking language. What is really at stake here is not menu selections and social functions, what is really at stake is the gospel. When a strong person's actions cause a weaker brother to sin against their conscience, there is a kind of destruction that happens. Their conscience is wounded. The word means, *battered*. The strong is taking a battering ram to the faith walk of a fellow Christian.

I need to make something clear. A stumbling block is when the Susceptible Weaker Brother is influenced by the stronger and actually violates their conscience. This is not referring to what they mean when they say, *I am offended*. There is no way you can live in this world without offending someone about something and the best example of that is Jesus Christ. The Pharisees were constantly offended by Him; who He hung out with and what He said. Christians often manipulate others with the whole "That offends me" argument as if that settles the matter.

What is in view is wounding or creating a stumbling block for my brother; he actually violates his conscience doing it due to the influence of the stronger brother. Paul points out what is really at stake. When a strong conscience brother causes the weaker to stumble, they are mistreating someone "for whom Christ died" (verse 11). Christ loves them. Christ willingly gave up His freedom to come and die for them. If Christ was willing to give up His life for them, why aren't you willing to give up eating idol meat for them?

How different we would treat one another if this verse took hold. Look around this room and see every person here the way Christ does. *I died for you. And for you. And for you.* The people you like, Christ died for them. The person you may not like so much, Christ died for them too.

How easy it is in the day-to-day of doing Church community to subtly downgrade our fellow Christians; to put them in categories and to fail to see them from God's perspective. Christ declares over every one of us, *I love him! I love her! And him! I died for him!* If Christ loves them, shouldn't we? If Christ personally gave up freedom for them, shouldn't we? There are more important things than idol meat or any other Christian liberty issue. We are in community with people that Christ loves dearly. Love is more important than any liberty issue. Yet, so many brothers in churches are ignoring what really matters, Love!

This is why verse 12 says, a sin against a brother is a sin against Christ. Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 25:40, *As you did it to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.* Our words and actions toward one another are spiritually words and actions done to Christ Himself. So the stakes are high here.

Love your brother enough to limit your freedom, if necessary, for his sake (Verse 13)

Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Paul goes biographical to show the strong at Corinth how to live. Liberty is important, but love is more important. My brother's spiritual well-being is more important than my involvement or enjoyment of something. If need be, I'll never eat meat again. *We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.* (Romans 15:1) The weak can change their conscience, but that happens over time. It is the responsibility of the strong to limit their expression for the spiritual good of the weaker brother.

How to Know Whether to Enjoy Liberty or Enjoy Limiting for Love's Sake

(Thanks to Craig Cabaniss for some seed thoughts on these questions)

1. *Am I fully convinced that it is acceptable to God?* (Romans 14:5)
2. *Can I glorify/honor God in it?* (1 Corinthians 10:31)
3. *If it is a disputable matter, will my participating be known to a weaker brother who is likely to follow my example?*

The question isn't whether a weaker brother will ever know. The question is, *Will this lead the susceptible and easily influenced brother to participate when their conscience isn't ready?* Spiritual leaders need extra discretion because we wield extra influence. Let's just say that I thought walking into hotels and eating their breakfast buffets was an area of Christian liberty (I don't) and I said to a group of you as you left today, *Hey, you want to go tomorrow morning to the Hampton Inn and see if we can get a free meal without them catching us?* Not because of me, but because of the role I have here, you might think, *I'm not comfortable with that, but he is the Senior Pastor and if he does it, it must be okay...and I like free things...* Pastors, elders, deacons, small group leaders, ministry leaders, parents and anyone in a position to influence, we must be extra careful in our lifestyle choices that the influence of where God has put us is not used by Satan to destroy the faith of another.

Heart check – *Do I think I am more spiritual because I participate? Would I respond graciously if someone asked me about it (as opposed to self-righteous, defensive, or indignant)?*

If the answer to 1 and 2 is yes, and the answer to 3 is no, and if I am not touchy about this but humble, then my dear friend, do it and enjoy it! *For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.* (1 Timothy 4:4) All things God called good are free to be enjoyed with thanksgiving and Christians should enjoy these things more than anyone because we see a good God behind them.

There's more to say here, but we're done for now. Next week, we will talk about how to gain freedom of conscience in areas of weakness. Did you know that on a Christian liberty issue, you can strengthen your faith and find freedom? We also will see a shining example of a kingdom-first, loving-my-brother-and-limiting-my-freedom lifestyle. It is Paul himself. We call it 1 Corinthians 9. We start there next week.

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