

1 Corinthians 8 • Questionable Things

Introduction

At the time of Paul's writing the question about meat offered to idols was a serious problem in a church composed of both Jews and Gentiles, especially with Jewish believers anxious to avoid contact with pagan idolatry. Most of the meat in Corinth was slaughtered in temples where the priest kept part of the meat but the rest was used for private feasts or sold in markets. And since sacrificial meat was sold at a cheaper price it was that much more attractive. If a friend or neighbor invited a Christian to a feast it was likely the meat had been dedicated to an idol. Should Christians participate in such feasts? Would some kind of demonic power be present which could affect the believer? Would eating the meat defile a Christian? We do not face this exact problem today, but the basic conundrum is still with us: does a Christian, because they are set free from the Law, have the right to live any way they please? The basic principles provided in Paul's instructions provide a framework when it comes to how to deal with questionable things, those things which are not plainly stated as black-and-white wrong in Scripture, but are borderline problems about which even Christians disagree among themselves.

¹Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. ²If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; ³but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.

[Read v.1-3]

Q: What is the proper context we should keep in mind where this issue is concerned? In other words, who are the ones having the biggest problem?

A: The problem comes down to a difference between spiritually weaker and stronger Christians. Paul is speaking to the issue of how Christians interact with each other. This is not a case of dealing with non-believers or worldly influences but those who are strong in faith and mature versus those who are weak with legalistic views of Christian life.

Q: What is Paul suggesting is the starting point for issues such as this?

A: It begins by considering our own attitude.

Q: What is the contrast to consider when it comes to our own attitude in dealing with other Christians?

A: "Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies". (v.1) We are not to approach things without consideration for the fact that we are first and foremost supposed to have a relationship with each other based on Christ's love.

Q: Is Paul saying knowledge should be cast aside for the good of love?

A: No, look at his follow-up explanation in v.2. It is knowledge produced in the context of a right relationship with God. Therefore it is not primarily defined as "arrogant" – characterized as an exaggerated sense of one's own standing, but "edifies" – which is defined in Rom. 14:19, "So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another".

Application: Consider your own attitude. Knowledge must be balanced with love. This is especially important when it comes to issues which are not Scripturally black-and-white.

Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

— Romans 14:4–6

⁴Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. ⁵For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, ⁶yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him. ⁷However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. ⁸But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.

[Read v.4-8]

Q: Who is Paul speaking to? Who is the group experiencing a problem needing to be addressed?

A: It is important to remind ourselves that Paul is not talking about the unsaved but the saved. The issue is with those **within** the Church who do not yet fully understand the blessings of liberty we have in Christ.

Point: *The unsaved are viewed as living in bondage to sin, but there may be saved Christians who live in religious bondage to rules and rituals still carrying with them baggage from the old life. Paul is addressing a spiritual divide within the Church.*

Q: How does Paul begin and end this teaching point?

A: The opening statement in v.4 “*there is no such thing as an idol in the world...there is no God but one*” and the concluding statement in v.8 “*food will not commend us to God*” establishes that these things are not sinful in themselves and can never make anybody a better Christian one way or another.

Q: What are Believers supposed to know when it comes to the issue of “so-called gods”?

A: According to v.6 there is “*but one God, the Father...and one Lord, Jesus Christ*”. Paul makes the point that we “*exist*” for God the Father through Jesus Christ directly.

Q: What is the bottom line source of the problem?

A: In v.7 Paul indicates “*not all men have this knowledge*”. Some have become free from such things in their new life in Christ while others are still clinging to ideas brought with them from the old life.

Application: *Consider your brother’s knowledge. As Christians mature through reading and obedience to the Word, they understand the Truth and the Truth sets them free. (Jn. 8:32) But they still have loving regard for those who have yet to achieve this maturity for themselves. When it comes to issues within the Church, for Christians knowledge is a tool with which to build, not a weapon with which to fight.*

⁹But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? ¹¹For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died.

[Read v.9-11]

Q: What is Paul saying must be considered?

A: The conscience.

Q: What exactly is the conscience?

A: It is that inner judge which condemns us when we do wrong and commends us when we do right. Our conscience “*bears witness*” to us.

in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them,
— Romans 2:15

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit,
— Romans 9:1

Q: What is supposed to be the difference between the conscience of the saved versus the unsaved?

A: First of all the Christian's conscience has been purged (Heb. 9:14) so that it no longer acts according to the world's ways, and second it is characterized as a "good conscience" which operates according to biblical standards (1 Ti. 1:19). When repeated sin is not judged and confessed the conscience becomes "defiled" (Titus 1:15) and eventually become "seared" (1 Ti. 4:2) to the point that it no longer convicts. The goal is to strive for a conscience that is void of any offense where **BOTH** man and God are concerned.

"In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men.

— Acts 24:16

Q: So whose conscience is Paul mainly concerned with in this instance?

A: New or immature Christians who have a weak conscience. (v.7, 10 & 12)

Q: What is the problem with a believer characterized by a weak conscience?

A: They can become offended to the point that it might actually lead them into sin. Because they are spiritually immature they might react to such an extreme that it produces spiritual damage.

Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

— Hebrews 5:11–14

Q: So what is the greater principle which Paul is actually teaching the more spiritually mature?

A: Whatever a Christian does, even if it does not hurt him, it must never be allowed to hurt anyone else. Rather than limiting us it allows for a greater witness and blessing not just to fellow believers, but can assist in winning the lost to Christ.

Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.

— 1 Corinthians 10:32–33

Application: Consider your brother's conscience. For a mature Christian with a strong, biblically-grounded conscience, they will not be affected by what takes place with the unsaved all around them, but a Believer with a weak conscience may be confused and led into trouble. As with most things in a Christian's life, it is not a test of knowledge but an application of faith.

¹²And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.
¹³Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.

[Read v.12-13]

Q: How did Christ personally provide an example of what it means to never cause others to stumble?

When they came to Capernaum, those who collected the two-drachma tax came to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the two-drachma tax?" He said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?" When Peter said, "From strangers," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are exempt. However, so that we do not offend them, go to the sea and throw in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for you and Me."

— Matthew 17:24–27

Christ knew He was exempt from an earthly tradition but "so that we do not offend them" participated regardless. It is an example of putting Christian love into daily living and refusing to elevate self in order to be God's testimony to others.

Q: Why would being insensitive to a weaker brother or sister in Christ actually be a "sin against Christ"?

A: Because they **ARE** a brother or sister in Christ, meaning that Christ died for them, too. It is incumbent on the more mature to avoid situations which may cause them to sin.

Q: So who is Paul ultimately speaking to in this passage?

A: He is actually speaking to **mature** Christians and their responsibility to build up the weak in the Body of Christ, even if it means self-sacrifice, which is the very spirit of the work of the cross to begin with.

Application: Consider Christ. If we are living and becoming examples of Christ, we in turn will be called on to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of others, both in loving the weaker of the saved and as a testimony to the lost. We cannot act indifferently to those around us.

Overall Application

There are dozens upon dozens of personal applications we can make of this lesson in today's culture. One example is the world of entertainment, where movies do not affect one person spiritually but another is more than deeply affected. The stronger Christian in such a situation could lead a weaker Christian astray. This could hold true for those not affected when reading secular novels and literature versus those who stumble over such things.

Yes we have liberty as Christians, but we are not **AT** liberty to become stumbling blocks to others. A tragic example of being a stumbling block is the Kansas church who shows up at the funerals of U.S. service personnel killed overseas and proclaim it is a judgment from God on the country for homosexuality. These people are stumbling block to both the saved and unsaved alike.

How would you apply the following admonition from Paul: "Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor." — 1 Corinthians 10:24