

“Stumbling a Brother”

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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Chapter 8 *Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. 2 And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. 3 But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him. 4 Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live. 7 However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 8 But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse. 9 But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. 10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? 11 And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? 12 But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*

In chapter 8 of Paul's letter to this church in Corinth Paul addresses a question the Corinthians had asked him concerning the eating of meat that had previously been offered to idols. One would naturally think that such has little if anything to do with us today. Honestly, I think we are apt to deal with a lot of scripture that way. We fail to overtly see the “connection” so we turn the page and move on. But God provided this written revelation of who He is and what He wants of us, and in 2000 years that hasn't changed. God hasn't sent us a new revised book. Despite the efforts of the revisionists, the “old” instructions still work without fail, so such therefore seems quite unnecessary. Especially in light of Him stating clearly that He “doesn't change.” (Mal 3:6)

Much of scripture may seem on the surface to be obsolete or not applicable to our age or us personally, yet we fail to see the greater picture and the broader ramifications of the text. In this case, while we may not have to consider personally whether we should be eating meat sacrificed to idols, it does speak volumes as to the issue of Christian liberty and the nature of our God. Both of which are invaluable when it comes to our practical daily walk of faith.

The believers in Corinth needed to reach out to someone to speak into their lives on this matter and others. They settled on Paul to be their counsel. This apparently was appropriate as far as Paul was concerned. He had already said back in chapter 4 of this letter that “*I am not writing these things to shame you, but to warn you as my beloved children... For even if you had ten thousand others to teach you about Christ, you have only one spiritual father. For I became your father in Christ Jesus when I preached the Good News to you. So I urge you to imitate me.*”

Now for the record, this issue today refers to a common practice, both in the city of Corinth as well as elsewhere in the ancient east. There were many temples to false gods...complete with their various idols, to which animals were sacrificed on a very regular basis. As in Judaism, a portion of the meat would be burned upon the altar, and a portion of *that* would be given to the priest. The rest would then be sold in the markets, called shambles, at much cheaper prices than meat which had not gone through this journey. It was concerning this meat, that which was sold in the markets, that the Corinthians believers were questioning.

Such may seem to us to be a small issue, but it was a real problem for a lot of believers in that day, especially those who had only recently been converted to Christ. At least a *part* of the Corinthians' intentions on this matter were indeed righteous, as they were trying to avoid even the *appearance* of participation in their old lives and their old false religions. For in the ancient world when a person accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior, he faced a critical problem. What was he to do about his circle of friends and their social functions? Paul deals directly with the Corinthian problem, but he also uses the issue and expands it to include the whole question of Christian liberty and personal rights. For example, can a Christian do his own thing? Is a Christian honestly *set free in Christ*? If so, can the Christian do what he wants when he wants? If not, what restraints are put upon his liberty or freedom? What is to control his behavior? What is the difference between the Christian's behavior and the world's behavior?

Just what exactly was going on in verses 1-3 and how it fits into this issue, we are not sure. That's the problem with reading someone else's mail. There is certainly some greater truth here for us, but we also must recognize some of the issues Paul was addressing were specific to the Corinthian church.

Bearing in mind what Paul has already said concerning the issues of pride in that fellowship, our best guess concerning the context of this verse is that Paul was addressing this ongoing matter of pride. Some were, no doubt, taking the low and humble road on the matter, while others were taking the high and mighty path, which no doubt involved a legalistic stance. Paul was pointing out that actions motivated by our perceived personal knowledge, if not motivated by a godly mandate will only "puff us up." Meaning it manifests itself in our arrogance. It is *knowledge exercised in love* which God seeks of us.

8:2-3

The world is full of people who feel they are so very smart, while the rest of us are merely nit-wits. Yet that thinking can only occur when one fails to understand where he stands in light of God.

Proverbs 3:19 says, "*By wisdom the LORD founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens.*"

1Corinthians 1:25 tells us, "*...the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*"

One of the greatest growths of our faith happens when we realize the truth of these verses. True understanding and knowledge of God does not come through the collective data found in books and lecture halls. True knowledge of God comes through the exercise and experience of God and His innate love! Our love for Him and others opens the doors of knowledge of Him in ways no mere intellectual pursuit could provide. We gain a *gnosko* (GR) knowledge, not found in books, but by experience. Therefore, I relate to God, because He is my friend and I walk with Him.

8:4-6

Paul reminds these believers what they actually all already knew; ***those idols are not gods at all***. People may look at them as gods, but they aren't the real thing. Note: Isa 44:10-20. There is only one God, responsible for everything and everyone. There is only one Christ, the "only begotten Son." For Paul, this was an obvious fact which he reiterates for the record. For us though, it reminds us of the narrow path of Christ. He is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the only righteous path, the one single choice. No one gets to the Father except through Him," and Him *alone*. (John 14:6)

8:7-10

Paul is reminding us also here that just because *we* have clarity of understanding, does not mean everyone else is in the same place and has the same clarity. Something may be the truth, but sometimes it seems that truth can only be swallowed in small bites! *We* personally may understand that it is okay to partake of some questionable practice, and in-deed it may be for us. But without that clarity... the mature knowledge of where we personally

stand, some other individual may have their conscience defiled, *meaning "polluted or corrupted,"* by doing the very thing *we* are *free* to do.

Paul acknowledges that the one bound by legalism is indeed the weaker brother. Yet he does not scold them or chastise them, rather he simply presents this as a fact. But what often happens is those weaker brothers or sisters feel somehow marginalized or slighted in a perceived idea that they are the Christian B-team, and the way to the majors is indulging in any and every "grey" practice out there. Of course they often quickly crash and burn because they stumble in such practices, forgetting that strength and discipline is not only necessary throughout our lives, but without some training and prep it's a good idea that I don't try to bench press 300 lbs! If we flaunt our freedoms in the faces of our brothers and sisters, we can easily run the risk of stumbling them, and yes, we then hurt them in the short term as well as the long. There is no love in that.

We must decide what our faith is really about and how much we *really* love our brother. Is the exercise of our freedoms more important than the prime directive, which is to love Christ first and love our brother as ourselves?" Certainly the greater church has much to learn about the reflection of God's love. And so does a lot of folks who have passed through our particular church and may still be here. We tend to express a love that is only marginally truthful...is overly emotional...imminently temporary...and ultimately conditional. Eventually...without fail...such folks will show their hand, proving that they do not possess the most fundamental aspects of a redeemed life which is genuine love and a living example. We proclaim our broad freedoms to indulge, participate, and in a boast of our spiritual maturity, we can hurt people. These kind of folks eventually...often after teaching and promoting for years a certain level of commitment and faithfulness, finally crash and burn themselves...often in the very areas they spoke against or avidly *for*. This is the hubris and entitlement that Paul was speaking against. A Christianity that never really reaches beyond ones-self.

We need to acknowledge that some folks simply need some time. They are young in the faith, and they righteously need some time to grow up.

But we also must recognize that there *are* those who remain in the spiritual "pee wee's" because their flesh keeps them there and they have no real desire to grow up. They are simply rebellious children who refuse to take on the responsibilities of spiritual adulthood. We recently spoke of these folks in the context of spiritual "Peter Pans." Hebrews 5:12 speaks of these folks saying that they should be eating meat and teaching others, but they are still drinking milk and struggling with the simplest of things. Some people just simply refuse to grow up. They don't want to deal with hard things or look beyond their personal and immediate comforts and pleasures. As a result, they are locked in a permanent state of immaturity.

Thirdly, some will stay children because they are simply afraid. They are afraid to go outside, afraid to engage with others, afraid to go to battle for Christ. So they never know peace, God's liberty, or the fullness of a whole life.

8:11-13

When Paul speaks of the weaker brother perishing, he is not talking about losing his salvation. The damage is to his spiritual standing while on this earth or worse, exposing that they have never truly surrendered their life to Christ which is the very essence of salvation. Romans 14:23 "*...he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.*" Therefore, if we sin against a brother or sister in such a manner, we essentially sin against Christ to whom the brother or sister belongs.

Paul is not asking us to lay aside our freedom. To do so would be talking out of both sides of his mouth. After all, how far is far enough if we travel down that road? Paul will expound more upon that later. But for now he is saying *if need be*, he would stand down from every freedom he had in order to not hurt a brother. Would we, *will we*, willingly do the same?

This subject was not unusual for believers in that day nor was it unusual for Paul to be dealing with it. In his letter to the church in Rome, He travels down this same road. (See Romans 14-15)

Romans 14:22-23 *“You may believe there’s nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God. Blessed are those who don’t feel guilty for doing something they have decided is right. But if you have doubts about whether or not you should eat something, you are sinning if you go ahead and do it. For you are not following your convictions. If you do anything you believe is not right, you are sinning.”*

Paul in this chapter, is calling us to judge things by love, not by knowledge. Paul says early in the text that "we all have knowledge." Paul...and furthermore scripture in general, *despite what the street will often say*, stresses the importance of intellect and knowledge in determining right from wrong. Christianity in no way requires an individual to “check their brain at the door” upon the embrace of faith. We will indeed have to trust Christ in aspects that are simply beyond our understanding, but Christianity does not make us some sort of mindless robotic drones. With that being said, the rule of the Christian is *love*, not knowledge. It is love that edifies and grows people, not knowledge. The Christian believer is not to be stressing his knowledge and superior reasoning because he can see a fact more clearly than other believers. The Christian believer is to love and to control his life by the principle of love. Knowledge is only partial. No matter what a person thinks he knows, it is incomplete. Man is totally incapable of knowing anything in its fullness and totality.

The point in all of this is that some of the Corinthian believers were immature; they had immature knowledge and were likely to fall back into sin and defile their consciences. They had not grown enough spiritually to break away from the world and its false beliefs. Therefore, if they participated in the questionable pleasures and social functions, they would defile their consciences. They were not spiritually strong enough to control their minds and beliefs—not yet—not totally.

Paul wasn’t condoning their immaturity...he wanted them to grow up to full maturity, just as I want of all of you. But the present situation did not change that, and everyone is not in the same place spiritually...no matter the reason or the righteousness of such. Paul’s comments were not really for those that were young and immature, they were for those who at least believed themselves to BE mature! It was about how those folks were to deal with the immature believers...to do so out of true and enduring love.

His exhortation is strong. In the old KJV Paul uses the words "by *any means*": *"Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock."* No believer is to participate in any function that could cause another believer to stumble. Christ **died** for him. Christ paid the ultimate price and sacrificed everything to save that brother. What are we willing to do for him or her? It is a terrible sin to stumble a brother or sister. How often we will simply do what we want or what is good for us, with utter disregard as to how it affects others! Many people have flushed a lifetime of service in this manner, and will be held accountable for how their actions affected others. Luke 17:2 *“It would be better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone hung around your neck than to cause one of these little ones to fall into sin.”*