

Sermon 28: 1 Corinthians 8:7-13: On Being a Stumbling Block

OUTLINE

Consider your brother's knowledge
Consider your brother's value

INTRODUCTION

One of our jobs as a parent is to train our children into making wise decisions. There are many things to consider when training our children to make good choices. You of course want their choices to be correctly informed from a proper understanding of the Word of God; you want their thinking to be broad and to take all the important factors into consideration; you would help them to see how their decisions will impact themselves, others around them and their witness. Paul as a spiritual parent is helping the self-sufficient Corinthians to make better choices. The issue is foods that have been offered to idols. It is clear from the context that there are those who feel entitled to eat foods offered to idols; they have theological arguments to justify eating these foods, even little slogans like 'All things are lawful for me,' 10:23; and 'an idol has no real existence,' 8:4. Certain of their superior knowledge they are eating food offered to idols not just from the meat they buy in the market, but also eating in front of unbelievers, and even going into the temples and adjoining halls to partake in religious settings. Paul has his spiritual parent and teacher hat on as he slowly over these three chapters teaches the Corinthians, who claim to have knowledge, to think properly about these matters. We have already highlighted that they have held this knowledge without love and consideration of others; and they have held this knowledge without other salient facts like, participating in idol feasts is to participate with demons. Paul decides to deal with the lack of love first, this is the emphasis in chapters 8-9; and then he deals with the issue of idolatry more directly in chapter 10. Why does he deal with what we might think the minor matter first, the matter of love? I think Paul chooses this order not to prioritize sins against people over sins against God, but rather to hit on a central problem that has resulted in problems in every area of their church. Paul is building up to his famous 1 Cor. 13 chapter on love because the Corinthians are loveless in their divisions; loveless in taking each other to court; loveless in being a stumbling block; loveless in how they have the Lord's Supper together; loveless in how the practice their spiritual gifts. This is a huge problem in Corinth and Paul addresses it here too.

Paul has hinted at this trajectory already, but in the section before us Paul is going to do two things, firstly he is going to add knowledge to the so called knowers and get them to think about how their knowledge is impacting the weak; secondly, he is going to add knowledge to the so called knowers in helping them to think about the value of their brethren, something they have not been thinking about as they have been thinking about their rights.

Now before we get started there is a very important mental exercise we need to go through to allow this text to speak to us. We need to distinguish 1 Cor. 8 from Romans 14. These two chapters are often confused with one another and too often taken as essentially addressing the same problem and saying the same thing. Although there do appear to be some shared ideas they are in fact very distinct. You will remember that Romans 14 was addressing the particular problems of disagreements between the weak and the strong. The Roman

church had a mix of Jewish Christians who were hanging onto OT ideas and practices; and Gentile Christians who were not hung up on what foods and what days the OT laws demanded because they were not Jews. This created a tension between the weak which were the Jews whose consciences were bound by their not fully embracing how Christ had set them free from the law; and the strong, the Gentiles who had liberty in these matters. Note then the differences between that situation and this. The question here is one of foods offered to idols, not OT dietary restrictions. The issue was one of idolatry versus non-idolatry not clean versus unclean. Secondly, the word conscience does not appear in Romans 14, in Romans 14 the Jewish converts are weak in faith; but in 1 Cor. 8 these ex-idolater Gentiles are weak in conscience. Thirdly, although the word weak appears in both contexts, the word strong does not. In Romans 14 Paul clearly sides with the strong and is critical of the weak; but in Corinth Paul does not mention the strong only the so called people who have knowledge and does not side with them but criticizes them. In Romans 14 Paul does not mind if someone eats or does not eat placing no prohibitions upon them as long as they are fully convinced in their own minds; in 1 Corinthians Paul very clearly does mind when and where one eats and does place prohibitions upon them. If we read 1 Cor. 8 through the lens of Romans 14 we will wrongly conclude that Paul is indifferent to eating meat offered to idols confusing an idolatry matter with a ceremonial matter and this is not the case, Paul is very clearly against the Corinthians becoming embroiled in idolatry.

Consider your brother's knowledge

V7, '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.' Paul implied earlier that these Corinthians did not know as they ought to know. Yes they may have certain facts under their belts like that there is one God and idols are nothing, and he quoted their claim that 'all of us possess knowledge.' Well here Paul pushes back saying it is not as simple as they have made it out to be. 'Not all possess this knowledge.' Which knowledge is this? Well one could not be a Christian and recognize the true nature of God as the only God and idols as not God, so this is not the knowledge in question. Paul is pointing out that not all are able to draw the necessary inference that therefore food offered to idols is not an act of worshipping an idol. Paul will go on at a later point to point out that eating in idol temples is still a participation with demons even if idols are not real gods. But this point aside Paul is trying to train the instincts of these Corinthians in a way that gets them to stop thinking about themselves and their superior knowledge and put themselves in someone else's shoes and see things from their perspective. He speaks about someone whose past was deeply associated with idols who may see this activity on the part of those who know, and by their example think that it is ok for Christians to be involved in syncretism, that it is ok to mix up the worship of God and idols and sin as a result.

You will notice that Paul uses the word weak here and as mentioned earlier we must be careful not to confuse this with the weak in Romans 14. You will remember that Paul sided with the strong against the weak and spoke so as to inform their weak faith. Not so here. Here Paul is on the side of the weak because the issue is idolatry not uncleanness. Paul is seeking to rebuke the strong not inform the weak, he thinks that the strong should not eat the food in idol temples either. Paul is not saying, it is ok to go into idol temples and eat meat offered to idols as long as no young Christians are watching. No, he is against the practice in part because it is having involvement with demons; and in

part as he is arguing here, your example can lead others into very serious sin. The sin that Paul is talking about here cannot be compared with whether a Christian can have a beer; or whether they observe the Sabbath in a certain way. The issue is not OT ceremonial laws but outright idolatry. When Paul talks about them being defiled he is not affirming a discussion about ceremonial matters but talking about sin.

Let's make some application. Are you falsely theologizing to justify what is serious sin? But closer to Paul's point here, do you realize that your life is public and all sorts of people are watching? Paul is not talking about things you can do while the weak in faith aren't watching but the sins that you should not be doing which are influencing the immature to sin boldly. Your sins are not only bad because they are against the will of God and a dishonor to His name. They are not only bad because you bring the consequences of them down upon your own head in this life and the next. Your sins can also seriously impact others in your life. Your children, your spouse, your siblings, your neighbors, your work colleagues, or as Paul is pointing out here your fellow Christians. We have been brainwashed into thinking that sin doesn't hurt anyone, that it is a harmless past time. Secondly, we have to think a little more deeply about all the other things we do that may be permissible for the strong in faith, but the weak in faith could stumble at. Paul is saying that you can't go through life insisting on your rights while doing damage to another by leading them astray. I am not suggesting that Paul wants us to live by everyone else's ignorance and scruples; he is not suggesting that Christians are captive to the convictions of the weak. But rather that we think about the impact our witness is having upon others. When you start dating think about what your children will ask you about your dating and your courtship and conduct yourself in a way that will be a good testimony, something where you can point to the way you did things and say, 'imitate me as I imitate Christ.'

V8, 'Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.' It has been suggested that v8 could be put in quotation marks as something that the Corinthians with so called knowledge would have said, I think this would be appropriate. I can see a situation where Paul who had spent 18 months in Corinth may have said something exactly like this when talking about how the new covenant Christian is no longer bound by the OT dietary laws. I can imagine Paul applying this to something like the bacon question. But it appears that Paul's teaching on what is true regarding OT ceremonial food laws is now wrongly being applied to idolatrous feasts. In other words we have a perfectly good answer applied to the wrong question. Instead of letting it be an answer to the question do I have to keep the OT dietary laws, it has wrongly been applied to going into temples and eating of the feasts.

Properly understood this is a great statement, it is a wonderful gospel truth. The word 'commend' is in the future tense referring to judgement day when we stand before God. On that day what will decide whether you have eternal life or not? It will not be whether you kept the OT food laws or not, what will determine whether you receive eternal life is whether you have trusted in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour and His righteousness is credited to you so that God can justly pronounce your righteous and all your sins paid for by His death. Sadly this truth is being misapplied to the wrong problem and being used to justify eating at idol feasts.

V9, 'But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.' It is interesting to note what Paul says about the mind of Christ in contrast to these so called knowledgeable ones. Phil. 2:3-5, 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.' Even in this letter to the Corinthians he talks about us having the mind of Christ 2:16. There are those who have knowledge and insist upon their rights and there are those who have the mind of Christ and give up their rights. The whole of the next chapter will be Paul illustrating from his own life what a servant who gives up his rights looks like. He will end all of this discussion about meat offered to idols with the admonition, 'imitate me as I imitate Christ.' Here in v9 we see Paul pushing back at our sense of self-centered entitlement to be others centered. Now in truth the Corinthians do not have the right to go and participate in idol feasts, this is how they are casting their case. Paul will tackle this point later, for now he is trying to train their instincts in considering how their actions impact others. Especially how their example can lead others into sin, V10, '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?'

Consider your brother's value

V11, 'And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.' Paul now goes for the jugular and really amps up the tone of his point. Firstly, you will notice that the knowledge that these Corinthians were priding themselves in is now a weapon, 'by your knowledge' the person is destroyed. Knowledge without love can be dangerous. Secondly, you will see Paul's language describing the effect of the Corinthians actions, this weak person is 'destroyed.' Now you have two choices here, the word 'destroyed' is the common word Paul would use to describe someone being judged on judgement day, there is no stronger word. So Paul could be saying on the one hand that this persons sins so badly that they not only get involved in syncretism but it leads them to apostatize and go all the way back into idolatry. Paul would then be putting the weight of their souls on the Corinthians.

Or secondly, although the language is very strong it is used hyperbolically by Paul to underline the seriousness of this sin. I am happy with either interpretation. Some might want to avoid the heavier option due to its implications that might imply that a Christian could lose their salvation. I do not find this problematic. Paul clearly believes that those whom the Lord has predestined will be glorified, and there is nothing in creation that can separate us from the love of Christ. No, but I do find it possible that Paul could confront these know-it-alls with the culpability of their sins and their impact. For from their perspective if by their insistence upon their rights and their liberties they were to mislead someone in the church, they would be culpable for it in this manner.

The third way in which Paul heightens the tone is by introducing for the first time in this section the word 'brother.' Now he lets it drop allowing the full impact of the implications add to the weight of their selfishness. To deliberately harm and wound a family member is a shameful thing and this is what we do when we sin against a Christian.

Fourthly, Paul brings the next heavy hitter, that person that you think is stupid; that person who you have misled into sin; that person who you have run roughshod over to serve your rights, is someone for whom Christ died.

Just before the black plague broke out in Europe there was a rich and educated man who felt the call of God to sell all that he had and become a minister for him. When the black plague broke out, he dedicated himself to taking care of the sick, and as what happened to so many he contracted the disease. He was taken to a hospital and there he was examined by the doctors. The doctors examined him and then began to speak to each other in Latin, this was a language that the educated understood, but that the peasants did not. They said to each other that he was too far gone, and that they should just leave him to die. They did not know who he was, nor that he could understand them, and he said back to them in Latin; the words he replied were along the lines of 1 Cor 8:11, 'do not despise this weak brother for whom Christ died'. And now as Paul applies what he thinks needs to be done he highlights this simple truths which the strong were forgetting. Those who they are influencing to sin, are those for whom Christ died. If you asked Paul what would you be willing to do for those Christ was willing to die for, what do you think he would say? Paul would say 2 Tim. 2:10, 'Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.' Col. 1:24, 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.' And just when you thought it could not get any worse, v12, 'Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.' To sin against your brethren is to sin against Christ Himself.. this was a hard lesson that Paul had to learn first hand. Remember Christ appearing to Paul on the Damascus road, 'Saul, Saul, Why are you persecuting me?' To persecute the church is to persecute Christ. Paul goes on to talk about how because Christ is the head and we by the Spirit are one with Him as His body, we are individually members of one another as we are individually members of Christ. This is a teaching that has tremendous comfort and challenges. It brings us great comfort and assurance to know that we are members of Christ, 'The great Scottish preacher Ebenezer Erskine (1680-1754) once visited a woman on her death bed and lovingly tested her readiness for heaven. When she assured him that she was ready to depart and be with Christ because she was in that hand from which no one could pluck her, Erskine asked, "But are you not afraid that you will slip through His fingers in the end?" "That is impossible because of what you have always told us," she said. "And what is that?" he asked. "That we are united to Him, and so we are part of His body. I cannot slip through His fingers because I am one of His fingers. Besides, Christ has paid too high a price for my redemption to leave me in Satan's hand. If I were to be lost, He would lose more than I; I would lose my salvation, but He would lose His glory, because one of His sheep would be lost."¹

But it also a challenging truth because we must regard our brethren and serve our brethren as we would serve Christ.

Paul ends this portion with v13, 'Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.' If it had to be a choice for him between eating meat offered to idols and making a brother stumble or never eating meat again, the choice would be obvious. Or to put it in modern terms, What Would Jesus Do? We know what Jesus has done. He gave up His divine prerogatives to become a man, a servant, and die a criminals death that we earned not Him. He suffered; He served; He gave became poor that we might

¹ Joel Beeke, *Living for God's Glory*, p. 117

become rich. The sacrifice He made was greater than any sacrifice we could make like never eating meat to serve our fellow Christians.

Paul's lesson for those who supposedly have knowledge in Corinth is to teach those who are self-centered; who are worried about their personal liberties and rights; who are self-satisfied in their opinions, to draw them out of themselves and give them a perspective taught by the gospel. Paul teaches us all to put ourselves in the others shoes; to consider how another experiences our actions; to place another's needs above our rights; to see the value that Christ has placed upon our brethren and to imitate Christ in His selfless service of them. When so many of us get caught up arguing about who is right and who has the rights, Jesus shows us how to give up our rights.