

Liberty & Responsibility

I Corinthians 8

"Stewardesses" is the longest word typed with only the left hand and "lollipop" with your right.

Maine is the only state whose name is just one syllable.

No word in the English language rhymes with month, orange, silver, or purple.

Our eyes are always the same size from birth, but our nose and ears never stop growing.

The sentence: "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog" uses every letter of the alphabet.

A snail can sleep for three years.

There are 293 ways to make change for a dollar.

The name Wendy was made up for the book Peter Pan; there was never a recorded Wendy before!

It is impossible to lick your elbow.

Interesting information, you say, but totally irrelevant and useless. That's how you might feel at first blush when you see the passage in First Corinthians that we are going to study this morning. Turn in your Bible to the book of First Corinthians, chapter eight.

Before we jump into this passage, let's talk about the three chapters that comprise this section of Paul's letter. He introduces another topic which was raised by the Corinthians in their letter to him. It's most likely that what Paul addresses here is part of a back-and-forth on a very important subject – that is, idolatry. Notice how he opens this section – verse one: "Now concerning food offered to idols...."

Right away you're thinking, "Okay, nap time!" Hang with me as we seek to understand why this is a major issue with those in the church of Corinth and then what application we might draw out for us in the 21st century.

Food is often at the center of debate and discussion. A Jewish Rabbi and a Catholic Priest met at the town's annual 4th of July picnic. Old friends, they began their usual banter.

"This baked ham is really delicious," the priest teased the rabbi. You really ought to try it. I know it's against your religion, but I can't understand why such a wonderful food should

be forbidden! You don't know what you're missing. You just haven't lived until you've tried Mrs. Hall's prized Virginia Baked Ham. Tell me, Rabbi, when are you going to break down and try it?"

The rabbi looked at the priest with a big grin, and said, "At your wedding."

Chapters 8-10 in First Corinthians deal with food. There was a very practical and pervasive situation facing believers in this church. Though there were Jewish believers already steeped in the food laws of the Old Testament dealing with what you could eat and not eat, eating meat was a vexing issue for those Corinthians saved out of Gentile paganism.

Let's consider the problem facing those Christians. It has to do with whether or not it was permissible for them to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

In Greek cities, sacrifices to the gods were an integral part of social life and structure. After a portion of an animal was sacrificed, some of the remainder was given to the temple priests, part of it went to the worshipper or worshippers, and some would be sold into the local marketplace. So you might never know whether the meat you purchased at the market came from the butcher shop or from the pagan temple.

At certain times sacrifices were so frequent and abundant, that the market was flooded with meat with the result that prices were driven down. This might be the only time when those who were poor could afford to purchase meat.

So much of the city's social interaction happened around these times of eating. David Garland notes that:

Joining in meals was extremely important in the ancient world because they served as markers of socioeconomic class divisions, as opportunities to converse and build friendships, and as a means to fulfill sociopolitical obligations.

These meals might be in a temple dining room or another building; they might be in private homes. The question then related to Christians eating meat that had been part of a pagan temple ceremony.

William Barclay writes about the further complication that had to do with the religious view in that age about demons and devils. He says:

The air was full of them and they were always lurking to gain an entry into a man's body, and, if they did get in, they would injure his body and unhinge his mind. One of the special ways in which these spirits did gain an entry was through food; they settle on

the food as a man ate and so got inside him. One of the ways of avoiding that was to dedicate the meat to some good god; and the presence of the good god in the meat put up a barrier against the evil spirit. For that reason, nearly all animals were dedicated to a god before being slaughtered; and, if that was not done, meat was blessed in the name of a god before it was eaten as a defence. It therefore followed that a man could hardly eat meat at all which was not in some way connected with a heathen god.

This is the culture and the belief system out of which most of these believers in Corinth had come. There are three different situations that Paul addresses in these chapters:

- 1) Eating the food in the actual temple where the meat had been sacrificed;
- 2) Eating food purchased from the marketplace and not knowing where it had come from or if it had been sacrificed to a god first;
- 3) Visiting the home of an unbeliever who puts a porterhouse steak in front of you and you don't know where it's been.

Apparently there were some in the church who had no problem eating in any of these situations; believers who felt that having been saved they were free to eat without any qualms.

Paul's concern is that some believers might be drawn back into idolatry through their participation in these meals. Central to so much of Paul's ministry among Gentiles was a call away from idol worship or anything having to do with the worship of pagan gods. For example, to the Thessalonians Paul wrote:

For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. – *1 Thessalonians 1:9-10*

To the Galatians, Paul wrote:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? – *Galatians 4:8-9*

Paul was deeply concerned that those who had come out of paganism should once again fall back under the influence of idolatry. He warns them later in this section – chapter ten, verse 14: “Flee from idolatry.”

But he doesn't just want to beat on them about the issue but help them understand the theological implications involved and how love should guide their decisions.

In chapter eight, verses one through six, Paul introduces the issue of idol food. Then in verses 7-13, he presents the first argument against eating this food because of the danger of causing other believers to stumble in their faith.

I Corinthians 8:1-6

Paul's comment about possessing knowledge may be a quote from their letter to him. We saw earlier in this letter how the Corinthians prided themselves in their knowledge, their wisdom. But Paul cautions them that knowledge "puffs up." The danger of knowledge is its misuse, its abuse. It often leads to arrogance, vanity, pride.

Love does the opposite. Later in chapter thirteen he will appeal to love as the highest motive for one's conduct and behavior. Here he simply says that love builds up.

The caution about knowledge is that it might be used as either a covering for doing wrong or as a club to be used against a weaker brother or sister in the faith.

Paul agrees with those Corinthians who maintained that an idol was really nothing, of no consequence. He affirms the fact that there is only one true God. For the believer, then, one need have no regard for these other so-called "gods" and "lords."

It is this true God who is the Creator of all and who sustains all. And in the godhead there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, to whom we owe our very existence.

And so when it comes to meat that has been sacrificed to these "gods," there is no tie in with true divinity; they are imposters. To the Christian, then, meat – even if sacrificed to pagan gods, is not inherently evil or bad. It would appear that some of the Corinthians are not really asking, "Can we eat this meat?" but rather, "Why can't we eat this meat?"

They made the point that they were free to eat whatever. And if it bothered some of their fellow believers – "Tough! Grow up! Get some true knowledge!"

Paul offers the first argument in these chapters about the danger posed to fellow Christians and lays out a principle that we need to apply today. Rather than harangue those believers who felt free to eat this meat, he goes first in the side door and appeals to operate within the sphere of Christian love. That means putting other's needs and sensitivities before their own.

I Corinthians 8:7-13

Paul says to the believer who knows that idols mean nothing, that there is only one true God, there are others who aren't mature enough in the faith to have arrived at that conviction. Though it might be perfectly okay for you to go on Friday night to the temple restaurant to meet and converse with friends and enjoy a good fillet mignon, there are other believers who yet see that as wrong.

Seeing you go there might lead them to do the same, but their consciences are defiled, and they might be tempted to fall back into giving credence to the god honored through the sacrifice. And while you can go to the restaurant and eat with no guilt whatsoever, the weaker brother or sister stumbles by violating their conscience.

Several times in this section, Paul quotes from their letter saying, "All things are lawful." He doesn't dispute that, but rather appeals to them to consider that their liberty comes with responsibility. It is their responsibility to live their lives in such a way as to consider its impact on those who are less mature in the faith.

Indeed, the greater commendation from God is not in pursuing the liberty one has in Christ regardless of its impact upon others, but in balancing that liberty with responsibility. That means being sensitive to other believers who may not yet experience that liberty and freedom.

This leads us to consider how we might apply Paul's teaching in First Corinthians eight, to our lives. What is the principle and where does it fit today?

The "gray areas" of life come into focus here. In his book *Decision Making and the Will of God*, Gary Friesen has a chapter that addresses how we deal with those things that are questionable. These are things about which the Bible is either silent or doesn't necessarily speak with any clarity. Friesen lists issues where sincere Christians have been on both sides: some who consider them forbidden by God and bad, and other who see no problem with them because of Christian liberty. Here are some of the things on his list:

- Attending movies
- Watching TV
- Playing cards, particularly cards used in gambling!
- Mowing the lawn on Sunday
- Drinking wine or beer with a meal
- Dancing
- Smoking
- Using a Bible translation other than the King James
- Playing guitars in church – Moises???
- Listening to rock music
- Wearing makeup

The list goes on, but you get the point. What is permissible in the mind of one believer is wrong or not permissible for another. Paul would affirm that in these areas, the Bible doesn't come right out and prohibit any of them. But we do have to address whether they lead to excess and sin if not careful.

And to apply Paul's principle in First Corinthians, will my involvement in these things cause another brother or sister to stumble. What does that mean? Here's an illustration.

Let's suppose I enjoy a glass of wine with dinner. Now, I don't because I have never liked the taste, but work with me folks! I invite a couple to join us. I also happen to know that my friend has really struggled with alcohol and, as a result, refuses to drink anymore out of conviction that it is wrong.

In my Christian liberty, I would be within my rights to have a glass of wine with or without offering it to my friend. But I also have a responsibility to my brother in Christ. If there is any chance that he would be tempted to violate his conscience, and have wine with his meal because I am, that would be wrong of me and an abuse of my liberty. For him, it would be sin; for me, it would not.

The issue isn't that it would offend my brother, but that it would lead him to do something that his conscience opposes. Even if I yield my rights for Christ's sake, I need to watch out that I not judge him for not having more maturity and a stronger faith.

Paul knew without a doubt that there was nothing wrong with meat sacrificed to an idol. And yet, he says that if it would cause a brother to stumble, he would never eat meat. Here, he takes it to the extreme to demonstrate the principle.

But Paul leaves room in this section of the letter to allow for the strong to exercise Christian liberty. He will get into that in chapter ten. For the one who can eat with a good conscience and with thankfulness, by all means eat.

In one sense Paul is walking a tightrope between two positions. On the other hand, there is such balance and perspective that he brings to this sensitive subject.

When all is said and done, Paul will appeal to the highest plane of Christian practice: Love God and love your neighbor. If I love God, I will love my neighbor, especially my brother or sister in Christ.

Love means that I will consider what impact and influence my life has on another. And even though something might be permissible, I will be sensitive to my fellow Christian. If need be, I will limit my expression of liberty and yield to responsibility in living in peace with other believers.