

PREFACE

How practical is God's word, how timely, how real. In the brief passage before us in this session the apostle offers an illustration, variations on which probably occur every day to every believer who is out in the world. Here is another example of, what I term, our God "getting his hands dirty" in our lives. Our God is not some distant, uncaring potentate, dismissive of the lowly Plebeians at his feet, but a gracious, loving Father intimately interested in the lives of those who call upon His name. As such, and because "He Himself knows our frame" ([Psalm 103:14](#)), His word is filled with practical counsel to assist us in our becoming more like His Son in a fallen world.

It is important that we consider this passage from the perspective of two bookends included in this chapter. The first is v24:

Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.

The second is the last part of v33:

...not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.

Here is Paul's overriding theme: the believer, the follower of Christ, must approach every situation with the good of the other person as a priority. More than that, as Paul makes clear in his Philippian letter, when we are focused on ourselves, we are not serving Christ.

Read Philippians 2:20-21.

Let us once again read the entire two paragraphs for context.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:23-33.

v27

If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake.

We now move from the marketplace to someone's—an unbeliever's—home. If we stopped here the situation—and the believer's response—is almost identical to the illustration of the marketplace in v25: "Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience' sake." And here he uses that annoyingly flexible (Garland: "slippery") word "conscience" in the same way. That is, Paul is saying that in this setting conscience should not be a factor at all; that "this matter lies outside the concerns of conscience altogether" (Fee).

For the Christian food is food. To use a Greek word, food is *adiaphora*—something spiritually neutral, neither commanded nor forbidden. And in our text, “the food’s history matters only when it matters to someone else who considers it sacred” (Garland). So when you are invited to someone’s house, and you sit down around the dinner table and the meat and potatoes and vegetables are brought out from the kitchen, there is no reason at all to inquire about the source of the food. There is no matter of conscience involved—yet.

v28-29A

But if anyone says to you, “This is meat sacrificed to idols,” do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience’ sake;

The rules change when we otherwise learn that what we are about to consume has a pagan—demonic—connection. Then, because we now know, we *must not* partake of the tainted food.

The jury remains split on precisely who gives the game away. Based on the traditional interpretation of the situation in Corinth—i.e., a conflict between those strong of faith and those weak of faith—many have said that the one who declares (or leans over and whispers in the ear), “This is meat sacrificed to idols,” is a weaker brother, and for his sake the “stronger” one is not to eat. But we long ago dispensed with that interpretation of the local church and Paul’s letter to them.

The best conclusion is that the speaker is a *nonbelieving* fellow guest at the meal, and the evidence for this is hidden in the Greek beneath our text, for it reveals that the guest speaks from a pagan point of view. Look at v19, above.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:19.

Note that it is Paul speaking. The phrase “thing sacrificed to idols” translates one Greek word.

eidolothyton = neuter of a compound of <G1497> (eidolon) and a presumed derivative of <G2380> (thuo); **an image-sacrifice, i.e. part of an idolatrous offering** :- (meat, thing that is) offered (in sacrifice, sacrificed) to (unto) idols. **Paul, as would most Jews and Christians, uses this word because it labels the meat or item as idolatrous—i.e., pagan, demonic.**

Someone who actually worships before a pagan god would not use this derogatory term. However, in v28, the phrase “meat sacrificed to idols” translates a different Greek word—one that *would* be used by what we would term a pagan.

hierothyton = offered in sacrifice, a more generic, non-accusative term for making a sacrifice to a god.

And now we see how this fits neatly within our two bookends: “Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor,” and “...not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.” *Why* should the believer refrain from eating the meat he now knows has been sacrificed to idols?

...for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake; I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's;

The focus is all on—and the consideration for—the other person. And once again we gain insight from the Greek beneath the text. The word translated “informed” (*menyo*) implies private communication. So here is how we can reconstruct the situation: You have been invited to a meal at an unbeliever’s house. Several of his friends and business associates have been invited as well, who are, as one might expect, also unbelievers. You are the token Christian. We’ll give the host the benefit of the doubt that his intentions are honorable; perhaps he is fascinated by and interested in a belief system that follows a crucified Messiah. Some reclined around the table are less generous about your bizarre faith, but at one point, just before the meal is set out, the man to your left leans over and quietly informs you that the meat had been earlier sacrificed in the local temple. As many still did at that time, he perceives the Christian faith as basically a Jewish sect, and everyone is well aware of the strict dietary regulations followed by the Jews. His remark is intended as a kindness, a friendly warning.

Here, in contrast to his earlier counsel, Paul’s use of “conscience” *is* operative—as is clearly explained in v29a: “I mean not your own conscience, but the other man’s.” We must ask: How so? Here is how Gordon Fee explains it:

Fee: The clue lies in the meaning of “conscience,” which is not to be understood as “a moral arbiter” but as “moral consciousness.” The one who has pointed out the sacrificial origins of this meat to a believer has done so out of a sense of moral obligation to them, believing that Christians, like Jews, would not eat such food. So as not to offend that [thoughtful] person, nor their moral expectations of a follower of Christ, and precisely because it is *not* a matter of a believer’s moral consciousness, one should forbear under these circumstances.

That is, seeking the good of his neighbor and seeking his profit so that he might be saved (v24 & v33), the believing guest is not to eat that which he knows to have been sacrificed to idols. If anything a Christian is to be a “moral” person, and he owes it to the unbelieving informer to respect *his* moral choice, and to witness to the unbeliever, Christian behavior that just might win him for Christ.

All this is getting more than a little circuitous and possibly confusing; since surely none of us will find ourselves in identical circumstances, permit me to offer a more contemporary illustration of the point Paul is making.

Quite a long time ago we were looking for someone to paint the exterior of our house. When one painter showed up to look the house over and make his bid for the job, he clumsily tried to witness to me as a Christian. To our later profound regret, we hired him for the job. The man was a brute who mistreated his hired help. He, I learned later, had earlier stiffed the paint companies, so that they required cash up-front before they would sell him paint. His work was of poor quality, and took longer than expected. When he approached me for an advance on the balance to be paid at the completion of the job, I refused, based on his behavior up to then. From then on he continued working, but with sullen, sometimes verbal anger. Finally, having reached my limit, I approached him, threw at his feet a check for the balance, and ordered him and his crew off our property.

At the start of the job I had pointed out some areas that required caulking and, handing the man three tubes of caulk I had purchased, asked him to do the job—which he agreed to do. By the time I paid him off and ordered them to leave—though the painting was not yet completed—he had not done the caulking (which, of course, needed to be done *prior to* painting). So as the crew members were loading their tools into the boss's truck I approached them and requested back the three tubes of caulk I had given him earlier.

They could only find one of them, so suggested I take two tubes that belonged to the painter. I answered no, those were his; I only wanted back what were mine. At that point one of the crew said words to the effect, "Boy, you're a better Christian than I am."

Whether I was or not is beside the point. In that moment I did what I thought to be morally correct as a Christian: not to take the property of someone else. What I realized later, however, was that I had just witnessed for Christ to those men. Their boss had loudly made the claim that he was a Christian, even tried to proselytize me. But his subsequent behavior and language bore no resemblance whatsoever to "the fruit of the Spirit." I could have easily accepted those two tubes of caulk, and no one in the present company would have faulted me—by their standards. But, knowing they belonged to someone else, I refused, and that refusal left an impression on those who had witnessed for the last several days the very un-Christian-like behavior of their boss.

Like the Christian in Paul's scenario, I did without something for the sake of someone else (unwittingly, in my case), as well as for the cause of Christ.

We have a Savior who is the supreme example of this way of living. Let's close by returning to the second chapter of Philippians. Even though the immediate setting for the passage beginning with v1 is the church, the fellowship of believers, I think it has application to our passage in First Corinthians, as well as any time we find ourselves in company with unbelievers.

Read Philippians 2:1-11.