

PREFACE

One day, when I was just a young lad in Marshalltown, I left my bike on the sidewalk and walked into the downtown establishment known as *The News Stand*. If you were in the business district and needed a newspaper, magazine, cigarettes or pipe tobacco, chewing gum or candy this was where you got them. I was probably there to get some candy.

When I entered the store this time I noticed a familiar face back in the magazine racks: it was the adult son of a family—a very conservative family—that was a pillar of our church. He was standing before the large display of periodicals, leafing through the pages of a magazine. I couldn't identify the magazine in his hands, but he was standing very near the far-back area reserved for the type of magazines you wouldn't want your mom to know you had in your possession—or members of your church.

In a flash the high esteem I held for this young man and his family dropped lower on the scale. Now, in truth he may have been looking at the current issue of *Life* magazine, but his proximity to the seedier neighborhood of the racks left an indelible—if, admittedly, a possibly unfair—impression on my young mind.

Throughout this letter there has been a subtext hiding just beneath the surface, but which comes out into the open beginning in Chapter Eight and is revisited from here on out—especially in Chapter Fourteen. That subtext is the uniquely Christian call for and practice of edification—the “building up” of others, specifically our brothers and sisters in Christ. This begins in v1.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1.

I use the word “unique” for a reason. There are, of course, other groups in which the members look out for each other, who help each other, but none with the God-ordained motive and Spirit-led selflessness of one Christian for another.

Last week after class a member of our class and I had a discussion about different situations in which it would or would not be acceptable for a believer to eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. It is true that we can look at each situation, check it against the counsel of Scripture—specifically Chapters Eight to Ten—to see whether or not it is permissible. But there is a more universal test for the Christian—one that does not require a specific proof-text from God's word: *Will my behavior build up or tear down the faith of another.*

And this goes beyond the criterion of weak or strong, whether one is a babe or mature in faith, for it is possible for our actions to chip away at even strong, well-established faith.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:7-13.

Paul's point here is that it is not about the meat; it is not about this rule or that rule, this is OK, that is not OK. *It is about how much you care about your brother or sister in Christ.* Through the prophet Micah the Lord made clear His priorities. (Even earlier on, in the Pentateuch, God was saying the same thing.)

Read Micah 6:6-8.

Filling our mind with detailed knowledge of God and His word, memorizing Scripture, fastidiously obeying even the most obscure of His precepts—all that is worthless if with that we care nothing for the spiritual condition and walk of our brethren. As Paul said in v1, Knowledge puffs up, but love *builds* up. It's not about the meat; it's about love, mercy, consideration for others.

In a sense, the behavior that Paul propounds is the antithesis of behavior today. In today's culture everyone is demanding their rights—even when said rights do not even exist. People manufacture offense, demand others do things their way, like the things they like, respect the things they respect. Everything is me, me, me—and if you do not agree with me, then you are Adolf's long lost kin.

Using the issue of meat sacrificed to idols—and keep in mind that the *primary* focus here is *not* stumbling upon some idol meat when shopping in the marketplace, but rather sitting down to a meal with others at an idolatrous venue—Paul tells the Corinthians to do just the opposite, to give way to the needs of others, especially if they do not share your knowledge.

v7

However not all men have this knowledge;

In v1 Paul agreed, to a point, that “all have knowledge.” But here he qualifies his position: All have knowledge of a sort, but not all have *this* knowledge, referring back to what he said in the first two paragraphs about the edifying aspect of love, and his discussion about gods and lords. In my opinion he refers back, specifically, to his statement, “indeed there are many gods and lords, yet for us there is but one God... and one Lord...” Gordon Fee puts it this way:

Paul now asserts that “this knowledge is *not* shared by all.” By this he means that even though at the theoretical level all may believe that an idol does not represent a [true] deity, not all equally share this “knowledge” at the experiential, emotional level.

What does Fee mean by this? How does that work? Like this: All my life I have had people tell me, “What’s the problem? If you are overweight the answer is simple. Just eat less.” Now, on an intellectual level I can agree to that; *of course* that is a correct statement. But does that knowledge prevent me from eating more than I should? Does it keep me out of the refrigerator? Of course not. Having that knowledge does little to countermand the habits set in place when I was a kid, my metabolism, my lifestyle. Empirically that is correct, and I “know” it—but putting it into practice is another thing entirely. This renders me, on that topic, “weak.”

but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol;

There were some in Corinth who “knew” that the idols represented nothing that was real, so food sacrificed to them was no different from food that was not. Nonetheless—because of their history, their upbringing, their “weakness”—it was a hurdle they could not surmount. They just couldn’t shake it. Couldn’t get past it.

and their conscience being weak is defiled.

It was not so much that their *faith* was weak, but that because of their history whenever they sat down to a meal—especially one being offered in the precincts of a pagan temple—they couldn’t help but worry that the food had been previously offered to idols. They just could not easily dismiss that association. And, as a result, they are “defiled” (in v11 Paul will use a stronger term).

defiled = *molyo* = to stain, to soil, pollute.

There is a play on words in v7 that is made clear in the KJVs.

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. (NKJV; emphasis added)

I used to think that the conscience was too closely associated with the flesh to be of any value to a follower of Christ—as illustrated by the familiar maxim, “Let your conscience be your guide.” Well, no; *God*, connected to me by way of the Holy Spirit, is to be my guide, thank you very much. I cannot trust my conscience. But God’s word does not so easily dismiss the conscience. Paul, standing before the Sanhedrin, refers to his conscience for evidence of his righteous behavior.

Read Acts 23:1.

conscience = *syneidesis* (soon-i'-day-sis) = from a prolonged form of <G4894> (suneido); co-perception, i.e. moral consciousness :- conscience.

The picture of the conscience from God's word is that an individual's conscience is one piece of evidence—a "check," at best—among several. It is too susceptible to outside influence (as our text reveals) to be a reliable gauge on its own. The hypothetical individual in Chapter Eight, who sees a brother in Christ eating food in a pagan temple, has "a sensitive conscience which at the same time is imperfectly educated" (Colin Brown). As we proceed through this paragraph we will be examining this further.

In v10 Paul will address one result from "someone see[ing] you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple." He writes that the consequence of this would be that the observing individual may "be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols." (*Oh, then it's all right for me to do this.*) This would be the result of the defilement of the man's conscience. I would respectfully suggest a second possible result from the same situation: a diminished effective witness of the one being observed. I offer this not as an *interpretation* but as an *extension* of the text.

When, as a Christian boy, I observed that man from our church in what might have been a compromising situation, my faith—my conscience—was not sullied at all. In that situation what was "defiled" was *my opinion of him*, and hence, at least in my eyes, his Christian witness. So, with respect to the apostle, I would suggest the possibility that *either* party could be "defiled."

In our passage Paul addresses exclusively the responsibilities of the more knowledgeable (i.e., "stronger") believer—and rightly so. He is and should be the one who relinquishes his "liberty" for the benefit of his "weaker" brother, and we will be developing this as we dig further into the paragraph. But I also find a couple of lessons for us all in the reaction of the weaker brother.

- Let us not be too quick to base the quality of our faith on the faith or actions of another. When we stand before Christ we will not be able to point a finger at our brother and claim, "Well, *he* did it!" Human beings will invariably let us down, because they are as fallible as we.
- And if, as in the scene from my childhood, the situation results in a different sort of defilement, let us not be too quick to judge a brother or sister in Christ. The observer never knows all the facts, and even if he did, he still hasn't the right, as an individual, to stand as judge and jury on another.

Let's close with a passage from Romans that speaks to this issue as well, and brings us back to Paul's point about love being more important than mere knowledge.

Read Romans 14:19-23.