

1 Corinthians 8:7-13 (11)

PREFACE

Paul has been crescendoing his point from the beginning of Chapter Eight: Were this a musical composition, it began, in v1, at a quiet pianissimo and has gradually ascended, in vv11-13, to a resounding fortissimo. In this chapter Paul has moved from general agreement in principle to vibrant disagreement in practice, and from this practice by some of the Corinthians causing defilement, or soiling, in a weaker brother to their choices and behavior causing utter destruction of another.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:7-13.

v11

For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died.

This verse presents us with a challenge—a challenge that goes beyond just deciding how to interpret the text, or beyond just deciding which commentator makes the most logical interpretation. This verse includes two critical words—“ruined” and “brother”—the first of which is the same he employed in Chapter One.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-19.

In these two verses from Chapter One the meaning is clear; in v18 “those who are perishing” is contrasted with “us who are being saved.” One does not need a Doctorate to understand that this speaks of those who are on their way to hell instead of heaven. This word translated “perishing” in v18 and “destroy” in v19, which is also used in v8:11 is

apollysthai = from <G575> (apo) and the base of <G3639> (olethros); **to destroy fully** (reflexive to perish, or lose), literal or figurative :- destroy, die, lose, mar, **perish**.

There are other words Paul could have used if what he meant to say was that he who is weak is corrupted or made to sin. For example, he could have used *phtheiro*, as he does in Chapter Three.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:16-17. (NKJV or KJV)

The other versions translate the two occurrences of this word in v17 as “destroy” both times, but the KJVs make it “defile” and “destroy.”

phtheiro = probably strengthened from *phthio* (to pine or waste); properly **to shrivel or wither, i.e. to spoil** (by any process) or (genitive) **to ruin (especially figurative by moral influences, to deprave)** :- corrupt (self), defile, destroy.

But of course he did *not* use this word, but chose instead a word used repeatedly in the NT, in the Septuagint, and in secular Greek to refer to utter destruction, perishing, death; Paul always uses the verb *apollysthai* to refer to eternal, final destruction (Garland). And this presents a problem when we combine this with the second critical word in the verse: “brother,” which is Paul’s favorite word for a fellow member in the body of Christ—i.e., a Christian.

It is a safe bet that most if not all the members of this class subscribe to the doctrine of the *perseverance of the saints*, which means, as Wayne Grudem defines it, “that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God’s power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again.” And we might add the flip-side, that those who do *not* persevere until the end were *not* truly born again.

It is this that brings the attentive reader of v11 to a grinding halt. We raise our hand and say, *But Paul, how can the actions of a Christian cause the utter, eternal destruction of another “brother” in Christ?* We cannot, as do some commentators, just gloss over this and move on. Is Paul really saying that the observed behavior of one Christian can cause a fellow Christian to lose his salvation and die without the grace of Christ? This is not the only place that Paul has written this.

Read Romans 14:14-15.

Not surprisingly, those commentators who deign to address the problems in this verse are divided on its interpretation.

Literal destruction: Garland, Fee, Lange, JFB, Clarke, Grudem
Cause the person to sin: MacArthur, Mare, Poole

So what are we to make of this verse when we subscribe to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, yet that troublesome Greek word really means destruction? For what it is worth, Grudem—who is the only interpreter I could find willing to spend some ink to discuss this—may help us out.

His first two paragraphs are speaking to the familiar and equally challenging passage in Hebrews 6. Then he speaks to our verse in 1 Corinthians.

Read Hebrews 6:4-6.

At this point we may ask what kind of person is described by all of these terms. These are no doubt people who have been affiliated closely with the fellowship of the church. They have had some sorrow for sin (repentance). They have clearly understood the gospel (they have been enlightened). They have come to appreciate the attractiveness of the Christian life and the change that comes about in people's lives because of becoming a Christian, and they have probably had answers to prayer in their own lives and felt the power of the Holy Spirit at work, perhaps even using some spiritual gifts in the manner of the unbelievers in Matthew 7:22 (they have become "associated with" the work of the Holy Spirit or have become "partakers" of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the heavenly gift and the powers of the age to come). They have been exposed to the true preaching of the Word and have appreciated much of its teachings (they have tasted the goodness of the Word of God).

Now the author tells us that *if these people willfully turn away from all of these temporary blessings*, then it will be impossible to restore them again to any kind of repentance or sorrow for sin. Their hearts will be hardened and their consciences calloused. What more could be done to bring them to salvation? If we tell them Scripture is true they will say that they know it but they have decided to reject it. If we tell them God answers prayer and changes lives they will respond that they know that as well, but they want nothing of it. If we tell them that the Holy Spirit is powerful to work in peoples lives and the gift of eternal life is good beyond description, they will say that they understand that, but they want nothing of it. Their repeated familiarity with the things of God and their experience of many influences of the Holy Spirit has simply served to harden them against conversion.

When Paul speaks in Romans 14:15 and 1 Corinthians 8:11 about the possibility of destroying one for whom Christ died, it seems best here as well to think of the word "for" in the sense that Christ died "to make salvation available for" these people or "to bring the free offer of the gospel to" these people who are associated with the fellowship of the church. He does not seem to have in mind the specific question of the inter-trinitarian decision regarding whose sins the Father counted Christ's death as a payment for. Rather, he is speaking of those to whom the gospel has been offered. In another passage, when Paul calls the weak man a "brother for whom Christ died" in 1 Corinthians 8:11, he is not necessarily pronouncing on the inward spiritual condition of a person's heart, but is probably just speaking according to what is often called the "judgment of charity" by which people who are participating in the fellowship of the church can rightly be referred to as brothers and sisters. (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1994)

Every believer is free to interpret v11 in the way that makes the most sense to him or her. I will not be dogmatic about this challenging verse. For me, however, Grudem's comments make sense, and even though they do not, for me, answer every question I might have about the verse, they offer a reasonable interpretation for me.

It is a very real probability that not everyone associated with this [your] church, ones we [you] might even have referred to as a "brother" or "sister" in Christ, is truly born again. Only God can know the heart; our evidence is mostly external, and may be in error. Clearly the person being addressed in v11, the one with "knowledge" is unconcerned about dining in an "idol's temple." It does not affect his faith one way or another. But someone whom this man would consider a brother Christian sees him dining in this venue and, as a result, thinks it is then all right for a Christian to do this—and he joins the first man, reclining at table in the idol's temple. But there is a fatal difference between the two men, something not seen with the naked eye. Unbeknownst to the first man, the second man has a deep and powerful attraction to the idols of his youth. Attending the Christian meetings in Corinth has helped wean him away from that former life, but it had such a strong influence on him that he remains weak and susceptible to the idolatrous beliefs—and he does not yet have the advantage of the indwelling Spirit to help him overcome the temptation. Joining his Christian friend at table reawakens in him the old attraction of that life, and begins a downward spiral that ultimately sucks him back in. After a while he stops attending the Christian meetings, never returns, and eventually dies without Christ.

With that in mind, let's consider a contemporary, real-world illustration of the warning Paul delivers in v11.

You are traveling down the freeway with a friend from church. You're going around Des Moines, heading east on Interstate 80 and, since it is almost noon and you are approaching Altoona, you suggest stopping at Prairie Meadows for lunch.

"I really love their steaks," you say.

"But that's a casino," your friend reminds you.

"That's all right. We're not there to gamble—just to eat. Food is food," you answer with a shrug.

"I don't know..."

"Besides, the manager there is a friend of mine. He'll take care of us."

"Well, I suppose, but let's go right to the restaurant, OK?"

"No problem. There's an outside door."

But as soon as you step through the door of the restaurant there are slot machines all around. You barely notice them in your disinterest, but your friend is immediately uncomfortable—yet at the same time he experiences old familiar stirrings, a reawakening of a passion he thought had been left behind in his troubled past. Like a diabetic in a candy shop, he can literally *taste* the sweetness of gambling.

By your senses the lunch passes uneventfully. But all the time your friend is overwhelmed by the seismic tugs, the internal battle between something he knows to be wrong and its attraction upon his weakness. He doesn't even hear your conversation as he is helpless against the siren song of the slot machines, and the magnetic activities calling to him through the opposite doorway leading to the casino.

Even you notice that something troubles your friend as you pay the check and return to your travels. But, not wanting to pry, you don't say anything. Unbeknownst to you, a few days later your friend will return to the casino, and every pull of the one-armed bandit draws him back deeper into the vice that his interest in the teachings of Christ had helped him overcome. But now that voice of the Savior grows weaker and weaker, until it is silenced forever as he gives himself over totally to gambling.

In a few months he has lost his job, and within a year he has lost his wife and children. Penniless and friendless, two years later he is found dead in the alleyway behind a liqueur store. He has died alone, and without Christ.

All because you wanted a steak from Prairie Meadows.

CONCLUSION

For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died.

Earlier we read a parallel passage in Romans 14; let's close by reading how Paul finishes that chapter.

Read Romans 14:20-23.