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1 Corinthians 8:1-13 - Liberty Not Liability

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All right. Shall we open our Bibles this evening to 1 Corinthians 8?

Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians as a result of really meeting some of the elders from the church there and some of the congregation as well who had come to Ephesus where Paul was currently, for three years, planting the Ephesian church. And he heard about the trouble that the church that he had planted for a year and a half in this very sensual port town of Corinth, the trouble that it was having. Paul loved the people. He was sure God had begun a work. He writes three letters to them; two of them we have, one of them is referred to in chapter 5:9 (we do not have). All three of them are corrective or admonishments from a father who loved his kids to the children that he had in the faith, and sometimes he played dad, too, some really strong, kind of stern words from Paul to them.

Both of the letters that we have are very corrective in nature. They were written to wayward saints. The world had gotten into the church, and there were lots of problems. And Paul takes them one at a time and spends a lot of time on each one. Started with the divisions that were among them as they were taking different sides; spoke to them about the immoral lifestyles that they were allowing in the church; taking lawsuits before the world, compromising their faith by adopting worldly standards; had a whole chapter that we spent a couple weeks on, on marriage and remarriage and divorce.

Tonight we begin in chapter 8 three chapters that really deal with the same subject, and I think if you write three chapters on something, there must have been an issue. Maybe a big one at that. But Paul writes to them, and chapter 8 has been called by commentators "the great divorce between truth and love" because Paul's topic, here in the next couple of weeks, is our liberty and the freedoms that we have in Christ and the church; how that we can use them and how we can abuse them; the freedoms that you have. We're free in Christ, and yet that freedom can also be misused.

For the Corinthians, at least the main subject matter (there's a couple that Paul picks), but the primary issue in the church there was the idea of eating meat that had sometimes and some way come out of an idol temple. The place was filled with idol worship. There was literally a temple for every possible god. So the question became – should I really be eating that as a believer, knowing where it's been? Is there a spiritual benefit to not eating it? And what about those who came out of these idolatrous practices who now find themselves, as Christians, unwilling to eat any of those things, even asking every time they go to dinner, "Where did this meat come from?" and getting the wrong answer, just walking out of the restaurant rather than enjoying the meal. So it's not a practical problem for us unless you're a diehard vegetarian....and then I've got Bible verses for you. (Laughing) No. I don't care. Just playing.

But the principles that are presented, I think, in these three chapters go a long way to having us become the kind of loving body to one another that God would intend for us to be. Every culture and every society has what we would call gray areas to address. And certainly they were no different, and neither were we. It is certainly that issue that we want to talk about. When Paul wrote to the Romans (14:5-7), he said, "Some people esteem one day above another. Another esteems every day alike. But let everyone be fully persuaded in his own mind. If you observe a day, then do it to the Lord. If you don't, then do it not to the Lord. If you eat, do it for the Lord. If you're saying you can't eat, then thank the Lord. But justyou don't live to yourself, and you don't die to yourself." There's differences of opinions and convictions in these gray areas of life. I'm not talking about how do you get saved or how do you get to heaven or how your sins are forgiven. We're talking about gray areas, and this was certainly a big one in the culture.

The first major council in the church met in Acts 15 to deal with whether the Gentiles who were getting saved should be placed under the demands that they first become Jews. Would they follow the Jewish laws? Would they become circumcised? How was their status as believers in the Lord? And there was a lot of discussion; a lot of people came in to give testimonies. They finally concluded that if they loved the Lord and turned to Jesus in faith, that was all that was required. And they had to send out letters, and it was a....I'll just say it was a big struggle in the 1st century, this whole divide between the grace of God and then the legality that had come out of the Jewish life. And James was....he was the head of the Jerusalem church. He was kind of that staunch guy. And so Christian liberty is certainly one of those central issues in the New Testament if you....."Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Corinthians 3:17). That's what we're told. Peter would write, "Don't use your liberty as a cloak for your vice, but use your liberty as a bond servant of the Lord" (1 Peter 2:16). And so you have a lot of freedom as a Christian. God has given you a lot of, I won't say wiggle room, but I'll just say a big panorama of lifestyles that you can certainly choose, and you're free in Christ. But the freedom is not a license to sin. I think the freedom that we have in Christ, at its finest point, is to be able to avoid sin and to deny yourself and to please the Lord and to encourage others.

When it comes to these undefined areas of spiritual living, there's usually two extremes that we find. There's either the legalist – the legalist is that person who sees everything in black and white. It's either right or it's wrong. There is no wiggle room. Right? So they will not, they cannot, they cannot tolerate a difference of opinion, and they live with this long list of do's and don'ts. Not a lot of freedom in that but that's where they find themselves. On the other side is the licensed individual who sees no gray areas and no black and white either. And so his philosophy is, "I'm okay with it, you'd better just be okay with it." And there's really nothing to govern his philosophy, and he demands of you the same thing.

Paul will say, in these chapters in the next few weeks, "Be aware of how you use your liberty because it is true you are free in Christ to do a lot of things. They're not always

helpful, and they can certainly be harmful to those around you who are less mature than you. And you should only use your liberty to the extent that you can help the weakest among you grow.” Don’t push the envelope. Pick them up and carry them with you because even though you’re free to do a lot of things, they may not be. And it is to them that God is interested, and Paul is interested.

So, chapter 8 we’ll look at thirteen verses tonight; gives us the principle. Starting in chapter 9 and going through about verse 13 of chapter 10, you have these illustrations of truth applied, and then the final application is towards the end of chapter 10. So there’s a lot to consider. I would say to you tonight verse 9 is the key verse of the chapter, which basically says this, “Be aware lest somehow your liberty becomes a stumbling block to those who are weak.” Or, if you will, use your freedom in Jesus to be sensitive to the convictions of others even if you feel – here’s usually where the rub is – they just should grow up and get a life, that their convictions are not warranted, they’re not substantiated, they’re not even biblical, and they should just grow up. But the Lord doesn’t give you that leeway.

Paul will use the eating-meat-offered-to-idols controversy in these thirteen verses to make three points. Number one – we all have knowledge of what an idol is. Second of all – verse 4 – an idol is nothing; we agree that it is nothing. And third point – verse 8 – food is not an issue in our relationship with the Lord. Paul will agree to all of those. We have knowledge of an idol, we know what an idol is and that it’s nothing, and food is not an issue in our relationship with the Lord.

However, there’s a lot of gray area here. If you take notes in your Bible, you might want to write Romans 14 and 15 in the margin; it is by far the clearest and more succinct, I think, couple of chapters in the Bible that speak directly to this issue.

Verse 1, Paul says this, “Now concerning things offered to idols:” (I suspect this is one of the letters that they sent because Paul now refers to something kind of out of the blue) “We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.” Both Roman and Greek polytheists had a god for literally every circumstance. There was a god of love, there was a god of war, there was a god of finance, there was a god of travel, there was a god of the harvest. I grew up Catholic. We had patron saints for just about everything. We used to keep the little Christopher on the desk, and then he got demoted somehow. I don’t know how that happened; he probably did something wrong we didn’t know about. But anyway, then he came back; now he’s back up. I don’t know. But it was all about pleasing the gods and gaining their protection and their help. In most all of idolatrous worship, food became the vehicle through which you would appease the gods. And at least from a practical standpoint, the priests – whoever they were, in these false temples and all – were often paid with meals, with meat. Part of what you were bringing would be allotted to them. The worshipper would take some of the meat back home. But the priests could only handle so much meat, so they ate; in turn would begin to sell it to local shops for cash. And they would turn around and sell it to the grocery store, to the restaurant, or to the individual who might want to come and buy some meat from the meat market. The system, especially in

places like Corinth, would have made it almost impossible to find meat that didn't find its way through somebody's idol worship. Everything would have been tainted, if you will, by their experience. So some of these saints in the church – coming out of these pagan practices – refused to eat that kind of meat because they knew where it came from and what they were engaged in when it was offered before these gods. There were other believers who got saved and went, "I don't care. To me, meat is meat. My conscience is clear. Medium rare, if you will. Thank you. Cheap food."

Paul starts by saying to them, "We all have information, knowledge. But if it's just knowledge that we have, and it isn't governed by love, it doesn't edify or build up. It puffs you up." Knowledge without love does not build up. Knowledge without love is egotistical. It is arrogant. It acts as if it is superior, and it is, in the context here in the whole chapter, on eating these meats that have been offered to idols. Look, all of us have to grow up in our freedom in Christ. We all have to.....our challenge to put on the new man and to grow in faith and to learn about what God has done in freeing us from our past and how He sees us. It's all part of that sanctification process, where we learn what we have in the Lord. But you should know – and I suspect that you do – that that takes time. And not everybody grows at the same rate or absorbs those truths at the same level. Love is the ability to wait for growth in the lives of others. The problem for the Corinthian church – as so many things in this church – was that there was a smug, kind of bold and proud declaration of liberty from some folks who arrogantly then ignored the weaker saints who hadn't arrived. It wasn't comfortable for them. It wasn't so easy to embrace. And so finally they found themselves needing some time. Verse 7 will say, "However, there's not that knowledge in everybody. Some because of the conscience of the idol, up until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol. Their conscience is weak. It defiles them. You can't go down that road and have peace with the Lord or before the Lord. You think you've violated your standing before the Lord." Did they do that? If they believe that, the answer would be yes. Have you helped them to grow? Probably not in demanding that they should be as free as you are. And I think that's the issue. It's going to take time and patience and love and self-denial and the working of God's Spirit. And your role and my role in each other's lives is not to stumble people with our freedom with total disregard for their conscience, but to help them to grow in the love of God. And the Lord will show them the rest.

Paul would write to the Philippians (1:9), "I pray that your love may abound more in knowledge and in discernment." Your love may abound in knowledge and discernment. That's really the key, isn't it? You know the truth, but, man, to share it in love, to practice it in love, that's an entirely different story. Now he's not talking about tolerating sin but rather using your freedom to stumble others into a behavior that they believe is sinful. And if they decide to practice what you do out of pressure from you, they're not honoring the Lord; they're stumbling before the Lord. And there's no personal conviction; it's your conviction. The knowledge of the truth without love produces swelled heads, not enlarged hearts. You can quote me on that. If I could remember it, I'd say it again.

But so often I think we exercise our freedoms without any concern of what the person in the pew or the person sitting next to us might really be thinking. How are they doing spiritually? You know, when you remember the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke

10), the priest who came upon him first was so wise in the technical knowledge of the sacrifices. The Levite that followed him was an expert in the rabbinical law. They were both filled with knowledge about what is good, but it didn't do much good for that bruised, broken, half-dead figure lying in the road. The Samaritan who was devoid of all of those keen insights, in love, reached out and edified the abused man. We need both.

Verse 2 says, "And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know." I like that. A true knowledge of God and His ways will keep His saints humble and teachable. The one filled with head knowledge is often quick to conclude he needs to learn nothing else, but everyone around him needs to wise up. Not so. In fact, Paul says in verse 3, "But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him." Or, if you will, a true relationship with the Lord in love will bring you to the point where your greatest joy is knowing that God knows you. I think what blew my mind as a young Christian more than anything else was that no one around me really knew how rotten I was; but He did. And He took me in. Had you found out what I was living and how I was living, you would have never had anything to do with me. But He took me in. So, what a blessing to be known by God. That's supposed to be our rejoicing.

You know, when the boys came back and they had experienced God's power upon their lives to cast out demons (Luke 10:17-20), they came to Jesus and said, "Oh, even the devils are subject to Your name." And Jesus said, "Yeah, nevertheless, don't rejoice in that; rejoice in this – your names are written in heaven. This is where your joy is." Praise the Lord for that.

I think Paul wrote his last letter to Timothy (2 Timothy 2:19), but it says, "Nevertheless the foundation of the Lord bears this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are His.'" It's good that you belong to Him. So, before you get on your high horse and try to move everybody along in their freedoms, stop for a minute and enjoy where you're at. God has brought you in. God loves us, knows us, and loves us anyway, and in that love we are made wise.

He goes on in verse 4, and he says, "Therefore" (because of that) "concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one." So Paul agrees with those who, in the group, were saying, "An idol is nothing." And he said, "That's right. An idol that is made of wood or metal or stone is really not a god at all. At best they are a reflection of the blindness of the maker and the worshipper." And Paul will, I think, in chapter 10 start talking about even the demons that work behind the scenes in getting people to bow their knees to these idols. If you see people idol worshipping we have a lot of friends in Thailand who.....there's a worship place on every corner. The monks come by the house so you can give them food. And you want to yell, "Hey, there's nobody home here."

"We know," Paul says, "there's only one God and that these are hardly threats to Him at all." But he goes on, in verse 5, and he said, "For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord

Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.” Paul doesn’t deny the existence of idols. In fact he said, “There’re a lot of them.” He just denies the gods that they supposedly represent. By the way, if you read through the Bible, Paul spent an awful lot of time being persecuted for speaking out against idol worship to the lost; inviting them to a God that was alive, who had given His Son. He suffered tremendously at the hands of Demetrius (Acts 19), for example, in Ephesus; that three-year church plant was over when they rose up to try to kill Paul. They were losing income. The idol-making business in Ephesus had been damaged by the gospel, which had changed so many lives. And Paul is chased out of town again, on the run, for speaking out against idolatry.

David, insightfully writing in Psalm 115:4-7, wrote, “Their idols are of gold and they’re of silver, and they’re made with man’s hands. And they have mouths, but they can’t speak; and ears but they can’t hear; and eyes but they can’t see; and noses but they can’t smell; hands that can’t handle; feet they have, but they can’t walk; they can’t mutter through their throats.” David just went out of his way to go, “Look at that thing.” It’s terrible when you have a god that you have to pick up and move. Or, “He fell over in the earthquake, let me just straighten him up.” Saint Christopher xxxxx.

Gideon, you might remember, as the LORD was preparing him to be a leader, and though he saw himself as weak, went and destroyed the idols of the villages in which he lived. And it was the people in the village who came to his father, who was an idolater, and said, “Your son destroyed Baal’s temple.” And I think it enlightened dad considerably because he looked at these men, thought about his boy, and said, “Are you going to plead for Baal? If he’s really a god, let him plead for himself.” That’s in Judges 6. “Just let him argue. Hey, he can take care of himself if he’s truly a god.”

Or you remember Elijah with the prophets of Baal saying, “Yell a little louder. Maybe Baal is busy.” Literally indisposed. Suggestion: “Maybe he’s on the pot.” That’s literally what the words read. He was as sarcastic as he could be, which is in the Bible – the sarcasm. 1 Kings 18.

Paul recognized that there were many idols in the world who were given great prominence in the lives of the people even though, in reality, they were just that, the creations of men. Now, he’ll deal, like I said, with the demonic aspects of those in chapter 10, but he clearly says, “They’re nothin’. Nothing.” And he repeats the truth that he knew in verse 6, that there’s only one God, and no one else can compete. In other words, those in Corinth had the right doctrine, and they were willing to act upon that truth.

Paul’s concern was that the weaker members of the church might not have grown into that awareness or that conviction enough to be able to go and have a burger at the local burger stand, wondering where it had come from. And he says, in verse 7, “However, there is not in everyone that knowledge;” (we know it, we believe it, but not everyone has arrived to that understanding) “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.” Not

everybody is so mature, and some people couldn't disassociate in their minds the meat on the plate with what they experienced for years in an idol temple. Somehow it just brought back horrible memories. After years of seeing things one way, they needed some time to be free to see it another.

So how do we handle them? We try to make room for them. "Their conscience, being weak, is defiled." We see it a lot in Christian circles today because, unfortunately, I think sometimes the church is very much a selfish place where people really don't care what other people around them feel like. And so we just do what we want, you know, "I'm free." But are you? You're kind of in a family. I love listening to old rock and roll music; I get in trouble now, announcing this. We actually had a lady leave our church five years ago because I said it. But if I know that it would bother you, and you get in my car, I'll make sure to put on whatever Christian music you want to listen to. It's important to you, it's fine with me. I'll save Skynyrd for when you get out. (Laughing) Some folks don't think you should be going to the movies, and I certainly agree there're a lot of movies you probably don't want to go see. Folks don't have problems having a drink with dinner; though drunkenness is clearly forbidden in the Bible, I don't think a glass of wine is necessarily forbidden. Or the kind of clothing you wear. Or did you get a tattoo? "Oh, you got a tattoo. Sinful person, you." Or your hairstyle or your lack of hairstyle. (Laughing) Or the worship style. "Oh, it's too loud. It's too long. It's too short. It's too soft. I didn't know too many words. Too little words. I don't know what it is." How money is spent. How people spend their time.

In reality, the controlling interest for each one of us individually should be: what kind of an effect does my freedom have upon a brother who is weak, whose conscience may not allow him to do all I think I can do? Pretty heavy-duty things to think about. Unless God gives you liberty, you should avoid walking in the liberty of others. You should do what God shows you to do. Romans 14:23 says, "He who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he's not eating by faith; and whatever is not of faith is sin." Which is the same argument. You have to be convinced yourself that "I can stand before the Lord, having allowed this freedom in my life in such a way that I'm comfortable and standing in the knowledge of God." Knowledge is freeing. Knowledge is truth; it frees. However, love demands that freedom be limited in the consideration of those around you who don't have that stature. Love and truth. It has to go together. You may be at liberty to have a glass of wine at dinner. You're never going to convince somebody who got saved out of alcoholism that that's a good idea. You're never going to be convincing to a family who lost a child to a drunk driver. They're just going to be stuck. "Hey, I'm free!" You certainly are. But let me just suggest to you, when you're having a beer at dinner, don't put it on Facebook. Or be careful that you don't stumble someone else. You have lots of freedom. I'm not your judge. But I'll tell you what. God is more interested in what it does to those around you, and that's important.

So, you have to meet those who consider, let's say, drinking as a problem (for whatever reason), and you should support them in that belief. You agree with it? No. You feel a freedom. But they're more important than your freedom. And that's the issue. That's always the issue. It is always the issue. You have to move towards them, not demand

that they move towards you. And that's a big difference. You have to make room for their weaknesses. Will they grow up? Sure. They'll get there. Are you the one that's supposed to convince them of that? Absolutely not. The Lord does that. He works in the heart. He knows them.

The third issue that Paul agreed with – whether eating or not eating these things has no spiritual significance – he says, in verse 8, “But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse.” There's no spiritual significance in deciding not to eat meat offered to idols, and that's the context here. So whether you're free in your heart to eat or challenged in your conscience not to eat, neither commend you or present you to God in a greater light. “*Paristemi*” means to put you before someone, as a dignitary, if you will; in this case, before the Lord. You're not going to get closer to Him because you've decided you're not going to eat meat. You're not going to be closer to Him because you're free to eat it. It has no place or influence, if you will, in that regard. It's spiritually neutral.

When Paul wrote to the Hebrews, in chapter 13:9, he said, “Don't be carried about by these varied and strange doctrines. It is good that your heart be established with grace, not with foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them.” In other words, there's no spiritual value here. So where is the spiritual value? It is in the consideration of the weak. That God applauds. That God would seek after in your life. It is good the heart be established by grace, not carried about by weird ideas. Jesus, in Matthew 15:16-20, said to the boys, “There is nothing that can enter a man from the outside that can defile him, but the things which are coming out of him, those are the things that defile him,” and He spoke about the heart being rotten. It isn't the food that goes in, it's the junk that comes out that He's concerned about. When Paul wrote to Timothy (his first letter, 1 Timothy 4:4), he said, “Every creature of God is good and to be received and not refused but be thankful for it.” I've never been able to pray over a hot fudge sundae very well, but I like 'em. But if it's sanctified by the Word of God and prayer, I think it's okay. I just.....I don't know. Stumbles myself. I'm telling you maybe too much stuff tonight.

You know, when Peter was led by the Lord to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10) to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, it was really hard for Peter. This was about as much of a stretch in his understanding of grace as he could find. There was a sheet that came down from heaven before lunch in a trance. The Lord told him to get up and eat those things that were unclean, and Peter said, “I've never done it in my life.” He used those contradictory words, “Not so” and then, “Lord,” which don't go together at all. But eventually he went. He went fearfully. He took a lot of people with him so they could agree that he had done the right thing, a lot of testimonies, a lot of witnesses. And then obviously he saw in the house full of Gentiles the work of God's gospel going forward. But it took time, and it'll take time with us. But you've got to be careful that you don't hurt someone's walk with God just because you're free. You're free to do the right thing. You're not just free to live for yourself.

Verse 9, I think our key verse, “But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak.” Pretty straightforward. Beware lest your liberty and even your wealth of biblical information hurts those who do not have those things. You’re supposed to protect them. You’re supposed to watch over them. You’re supposed to deny yourself for their sake. It wasn’t happening in this church. It was all about one-upmanship and, “I’m more spiritual than you,” and, “Let’s go to the temple and eat.”

Verse 10, “For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple,” there you go, having a Coke at the bar, “will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?” Redeemed at such a cost. Now that’s his point. You’re stumbling a brother who Jesus paid the ultimate price for. In other words, you should probably value each other more highly. Right? You’re a child that God has come to save. We should be careful never to weaken or stumble our brethren. It’s kind of like you have an electrical plug, and you have toddlers at home, you don’t pull out that cover over the plug by saying to your wife, “I can handle it.” Yeah, you can handle it. We’re just worried about them sticking their finger in it. So with this. Do not just take your freedom and ignore the weakness of conscience that other people have; which means you’ve got to get to know them and understand where they’re coming from. It bespeaks a relationship, which I think is another argument to stay in a local church and get known by people and know others. You know....and I should say Paul lays the responsibility for the welfare of the weaker brother squarely at the feet of the so-called stronger one who has greater knowledge who now is just asked not to just live with that knowledge but to exercise God’s love in the use of it.

You know, in the world your conscience can convict you of sin as the Holy Spirit begins to speak to your heart, but a worldly conscience that is lost in sin can also be deceived. It can give you false information, if you will. “There’s a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Proverbs 16:25). They seem to be right. However, when someone gets saved, that seared conscience that Paul wrote to Timothy about (1 Timothy 4:2) that could be seared with a hot iron, all of a sudden comes to life. And the conscience, as much as it was damaged, can begin to correctly think and look and view the world around it, especially as the Word of God gets in. So the Holy Spirit forms in his mind and in his outlook, but that just takes some time. So when Paul writes to the Romans in chapter 14:5, “One person esteems one day above another, and the other person esteems every day alike,” he says this, “be fully convinced in your mind.” So whatever your convictions are before the Lord, live those out. Stand on the Scriptures you’ve learned. And if you want to grow and you want to examine your position, sometimes it’s a hard lesson to grow. But we should never be pushing people into a corner. We should be helping them to grow.

The Word of God cultivates in you, and it takes time to bring forth fruit. When Paul stood before Felix, in his trial, he said, “I’ve always strived to have a conscience that is without offense towards God and before men” (Acts 24:16). In other words, “I want to be sure I haven’t offended the Lord in what I’ve decided to do or offended people that

I'm seeking to serve." When he wrote to the Romans in chapter 9:1-3, later on, he said, "I want to tell you the truth in Christ. I'm not lying. My conscience also bearing witness in the Holy Spirit that my heart is constantly grieved for my people who have been accursed. I would be willing to die in their place" (talking about the Jews). "I'm not telling you a lie," he said, "I feel like this every day." Paul, when he wrote to Timothy his first letter (1 Timothy 1:5), "The purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart in a good conscience and sincere faith." So, we need to let God work out the issues in the hearts of the people around us. That's not our job. "Come on, man! Let it go! Join us. Skynyrd." Stupid. Just stupid. Just not worth it.

Verse 12, "But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ." Man. That's not a memory verse, is it? Powerful words that basically just Paul says, "Take this seriously. Take it seriously." Jesus will say to the boys in Matthew 18:6, "If you cause one of these little ones to stumble who believe in me, and cause them to sin, it would be better for you to have a millstone thrown around your neck and be cast into the sea and drowned." I mean, that's how protective the Lord is of your life and mine. Don't you be the stumbling block or get yourself fitted for some cement floaties 'cause you're goin' down. More than a misuse of freedom and a wrong exercise of knowledge is forsaking the love of God and sinning against your brother which, in turn, causes you, then, to sin against God who wants you to use your liberty personally but not at their expense.

Paul says this, at the end of this portion of the Scriptures (verse 13), "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat," (oh, man, another vegetarian) "lest I make my brother stumble." In other words, as much as I enjoy having the steak or whatever he's eating, if it hurts one of God's children, I'll never eat it again. There's no comparison between the freedom and the exercise of it for the sakes of others. That's pretty awesome. The limits of our freedom out of love for the brethren – knowledge used in love. That's exactly what God would have us to do.

Let me give you seven words that start with "E" that you might want to consider when you're dealing with gray areas in your own life and you're wondering what you should do.

Number one is: Excess. It seems a lot of times people practice their freedoms to excess. Is this activity necessary? Can I live without it? It might be a good question. Second of all: Expediency. Is it helpful? Is it useful? Is it desirable? Third word: Emulation. Would Jesus do it? Would Jesus do it? "He who says he abides in Him ought to walk even as He walked" (1 John 2:6). Would Jesus do it? Fourth one: Example. Would we like others to do the same? Would we like them to respond as I have? Paul said to Timothy – 40 years old, just taking over the church in Ephesus, "Timothy, let no one despise your youth. Be an example to the believer in word and in conduct, in love and spirit and faith and purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). Be an example. How many is that? Four? Five: Evangelism. Is what you've decided to do going to make it easier or harder for folks to be drawn to Jesus through your life? Paul wrote to the Colossians in chapter

4:5-6, "Walk in wisdom to those who are without, redeeming the time. May your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that they may know how to answer each one." Is your freedom practice evangelical? Is it helpful?

Number six: Edification. Does it edify? Does it build up? Does it make you stronger? Paul would write, in chapter 10:23 of 1 Corinthians (and we'll get there in a few weeks), "Everything is lawful for me, but not everything is helpful. Everything is lawful to me, but not everything builds up" or edifies.

And finally, one more "E": Exultation. Does it glorify the Lord? I mean, is it really giving God honor? "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all to the glory of God" (Colossians 3:17, 1 Corinthians 10:31).

Excess, Expediency, Emulation, Example, Evangelism, Edification and Exultation.
That's it.

It is biblical considerations that make us free to serve the Lord by serving one another. But when your liberty becomes a liability, you may have had a head full of knowledge, but you're way short on the love department. So, enjoy yourself but keep an eye around you for those that you need to help. Amen?

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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