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1 Corinthians 8:1-13 “Principles for Deciding Questionable Practices”

Intro. Both inside and outside the church there is disagreement and confusion regarding the issue of morality. According to Gallup's annual Values and Beliefs survey, most Americans find the following activities morally acceptable: divorce, gambling, and premarital sex. On what do they base their conclusion? While many Christians still reject these activities as morally acceptable, we may disagree about some of the gray areas of Christian living. What about smoking, drinking wine moderately, going to movies, playing golf or tennis on Sunday, listening to rock music, and the list could go on and on. Some Christian groups forbid playing cards, wearing makeup, listening to contemporary Christian music, dancing, mixed swimming, and so forth. How do you make the right decision about the morality of such issues? Ladies, how do you decide what kind of clothing is morally appropriate?

Now one problem is Christians can become virtual enemies arguing over such issues. We can end up doing what is clearly sinful while we argue over what is not clearly sinful. So how are we to know whether we as Christians should do such things?

In answer to this question, I want us first to consider two wrong approaches. Many will take the popular approach of the libertarian. This approach says, “I’m going to do what I want to do unless it clearly hurts somebody else.” It seems that many of us want to get as close to the line of sin as we can. And if you show them a verse that seems to show that it is sinful, some will look for any loophole to get around obeying God. The other wrong approach is legalism. It answers the problem of biblical silence on many issues by coming up with strict, exhaustive and specific rules governing our conduct. Legalistic churches will come up with specific rules about all the issues I have mentioned, and many more. The legalist tends to become too judgmental. They tend to rely upon self-effort rather than the Holy Spirit. And they tend to practice an extreme form of separatism that prevents them from sufficient contact with unbelievers, and fail to be the salt of the earth that God intended (Matt. 5:13-16).

Now instead of thousands of specific rules and regulations governing every aspect of our conduct, God has set down some timeless principles that can be applied to many different situations. I believe parents should not just teach laws and rules. They are fine for young children, but maturity comes when we learn basic principles which we then apply to specific situations. For example, in chapter 6 verse 12, Paul has already given at least two principles for determining the rightness or wrong of some activity. One was, “Is the activity beneficial?” Can you honestly say the activity is good for you? Secondly, “Is the activity addictive or controlling?” Paul wrote, “All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.”

Now this morning we are going to learn two more very important principles. I hope that you will learn these principles, and apply them to your daily life in living for the Lord. Now the first principle is this:

I. GUIDE YOUR MORAL DECISIONS BY BIBLICAL KNOWLEDGE

The Corinthians faced a moral dilemma, and they asked for Paul’s help. He says in v.1a says, “Now concerning things offered to idols.” The regular worship of idols involved animal

sacrifice. Part of the animal sacrifice was burned on the altar for the god. Part was given to the priest as payment for his services. And part was retained by the worshipper. What the priest or worshipper did not eat was sold to the market. So most meat in everyday society had been sacrificed to a pagan god. Add to that is the fact that many social events, like weddings, were held at the temples of false gods. Also, they had trade unions or guilds which met at the temples. And the food served at such social functions usually came from meat that had come from an animal sacrificed to the gods. The big question was: Should a Christian eat meat that had been sacrificed to an idol?

Notice in v.1 the first principle that he applied to this situation: “We know that we all have knowledge.” The words “know” or “knowledge” are found 11 times in these 13 verses, so this is an important theme of this chapter. So one way you can decide questionable practices is to take the biblical truths that you know, and apply them to the situation. That’s exactly what Paul does here in vv.4-6.

Now let’s consider three steps regarding how spiritual and biblical knowledge will help determine right from wrong. First of all:

A. Learn the Word of God – The Corinthians did well at acquiring knowledge. Back in 1:5 Paul writes, “that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge.” In 8:4 Paul refers to the Corinthians knowledge that there is but one true God. So if you are going to live right, and avoid doing what’s wrong, the starting place is to learn the Word of God. That is the most important objective standard of right & wrong. It either gives specific teachings on a moral issue, or at least the principles you need to make a decision on each moral issue you face. Don’t be deceived by the current popular thinking of relativism, which rejects the absolute truths of God’s Word. If there is a God, you can be sure that He has moral standards that are absolute.

So there are few things more important in the Christian life than a daily study of God’s Word. That will help you more than anything else to acquire the knowledge you need to live life successfully. You should also come to Sunday School & church to learn more of God’s Word. God’s Word is a foundation for the Christian life. It is impossible to believe or obey what is not known (cf. Rom. 10:17). If you will learn the truths of God’s Word, you will find that God’s Word is truly “a lamp unto your feet, and a light unto your path” in your daily walk (Psa. 119:105). On the other hand, the Lord told Israel, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hos. 4:6). They did not know enough of God’s Word to do what was right, and avoid what was wrong.

Have you taken this first step? Are you actively learning the Word of God? Now the second step is:

B. Apply Spiritual Knowledge to this Issue - This is important, for not only do you need to know spiritual truth, but you also need to know how to apply those truths to specific situations. What good is knowledge if it is not applied to real life?

When I was a boy an encyclopedia salesman came to our home. At the end of the sale, my parents bought a set of encyclopedias. It even came with a bookcase. There was a whole lot of knowledge on those shelves. But very little of it ever was obtained and applied to real life. Sadly, some Christians are like that little bookcase. They're crammed full of information, facts and knowledge-but it never gets applied. Christianity is intended to be applied. So we not only need to learn the Bible, but we need to apply that biblical knowledge to specific life situations.¹

¹ Illus.#C-1317, based on A.A. Gillmartin; Sermon-illustrations-Each-Week, sheeppcribone, blogspot.com; in Pulpit Helps, Page 28, June 2005.

Let's see from vv. 4-6 how Paul applied the biblical knowledge about God to the situation the Corinthians faced. Paul says in v.4, "We know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one" (cf. Deut. 32:15-17; Isa. 44:6-20). Then v.6 says, "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."² This is one of the strongest monotheistic declarations in the Scripture. The Corinthian believers had been taught this, and knew this. That's what Jews and Christians believed. On the other hand, v.5 gives the belief of most of the ancient world. The Greeks and Romans were polytheistic, worshiping "many gods." They had a god, or a group of gods, for every circumstance, every need, and every activity of any consequence.

Now let's follow Paul's line of argument here, and see how we should apply such knowledge. Now our knowledge tells us that there is only one true God. Therefore, the other so-called gods are not gods at all (v.4). An idol was nothing but the representation of a false god who existed only in the darkened minds of those who worshiped it.³ The stone, precious metal, or wood which represented the idol was real, but the object itself was not a god. Since the idol is not a real god, then it has no bearing on the animal sacrificed. A nonexistent god could not contaminate food offered on his altar. If its meat is sold in the market, it is meat; nothing more, nothing less. Also we know there is only one God, and therefore He is the Creator of that animal, and that meat. What God created is good. Paul's ultimate conclusion is found in v.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." The eating of meat has no direct bearing on our relationship to God. We are not going to be considered saints or sinners based on whether or not we eat a piece of meat. This directly contradicts several religions, cults, and denominations. Jesus affirmed this same truth in Mk. 7:15 when He said, "There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him."⁴ Only when we eat to excess, or not at all, does eating become right or wrong. Generally speaking, eating is morally neutral.

So Paul applies knowledge to this situation, and reaches a conclusion. So you say, "Then it is OK to eat meat that has been sacrificed to any idol. Right?" Not necessarily. We must keep in mind one more step:

C. But Consider the Problems of Relying upon Knowledge Alone - Knowledge, even of God's Word, is not enough. It is essential but not all-sufficient. As Paul said in v.1, knowledge alone can lead one to be puffed up with pride. Paul confronts that problem in v.2 when he says, "And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know."

Then, in v.7a, Paul addressed another problem with relying upon knowledge alone to determine questions of morality. He wrote, "However, there is not in everyone that knowledge...." Not all believers were mature in their knowledge and understanding of spiritual truths. Christians are always going to have different opinions about certain things, due to different levels of biblical & spiritual knowledge (cf. Col. 2:16), and different backgrounds. Some of the Christians in Corinth, for example, were offended by the practice of eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol. So Paul wrote in v.7b, "...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." God saved them from idolatry, and

² Paul is careful about his use of prepositions here. All things are "*ek*" the Father. All things, including our relationship to the Father, are "*dia*" Christ.

³ Blomberg says, "A correct understanding of verses 4-6 must leave room for Paul's absolute prohibition of *idolatrous* eating and for his belief in the reality of the demonic world (10:18-22). But demons do not inherently reside in either statues or food."

⁴ Of course, we can misuse food with gluttony, or we can make the eating of food something spiritually positive by giving thanks (cf. I Tim. 4:4). But in and of itself, food does not contaminate the soul.

most of their life they considered idols to be real, and they had trouble eating meat sacrificed to an idol with a clear conscience.

And so because of these limitations to the use of spiritual knowledge, we need another determining factor. Spiritual knowledge *alone* may help you decide that some activity is perfectly all right. However, we must not stop there. We must advance to a second principle for determining right and wrong, and that is:

II. ALWAYS LIVE BY THE PRINCIPLE OF LOVE

Jesus taught that love for God and others are the most important commands. Notice how Paul elevates love for God as most important in v.3, “But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him.” After, the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Paul taught that love fulfills the Law (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14). Love for others should guide your moral actions. So love and knowledge must go together; “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). In act, in some respects love is more important than knowledge. As we’ve seen from v.1b, knowledge must be mixed with love or you will end up with a big head instead of an enlarged heart.

Love overlooks selfish desires in favor of what is best for the person we love. Love provides the best motivation for doing the right thing. And as Paul says in v.1, “love edifies.” It builds up our brother, and helps him in his walk with the Lord. On the other hand, love will not do anything that will hurt or tear down another. So love for God and love for others should determine our conduct. Love is the key to right behavior. Our primary focus is not to be on personal liberty but on love.

So here in these verses, Paul teaches a basic principle: love will lead you to consider how your example will impact others. Do not just say, “The Bible doesn’t say I can’t do it, and I have a right to do it, so I’m going to do it.” While society teaches us to assert our rights as a priority, the Bible teaches us that love for others should be our priority. Our Christian faith must be practiced with others. The believer’s life is not altogether a private matter. We do not live our Christian lives in a vacuum; we are inextricably linked to every other brother and sister in our fellowship. What you do affects your family. What you do affects your church. What you do affects your community. Our actions are like a rock that is thrown into a pond. There is a ripple effect. And so, before we exercise our Christian liberty in a given area not forbidden by Scripture, we should consider how it will affect others.

So in reference to others, love will lead us to ask: Is it beneficial both to myself and to others? This is the principle we learned in 6:12. Will it help another believer in their walk with the Lord? Will it help me lead an unbeliever to Christ? Then, ask, “Is it harmful?” Could it hurt a fellow believer? Could it damage our witness before unbelievers?

Now let’s apply this principle to a specific example. Paul uses an extreme example in v.10 of a Christian, not only eating meat sacrificed to an idol in their home, but even eating it in an idol temple. This was quite possible. Paul is not talking about Christians actually participating in idol worship. Rather, some Christians probably did continue to go to the trade union meetings or social gatherings that occurred in the pagan temples. They knew that an idol was nothing, and that they did not need to fear the pagan gods.

However, in v.9 Paul warns, “But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak.”⁵ The word “liberty” is literally “authority, or right.” Paul

⁵ Blomberg: Nothing in the context justifies an association of “weaker brothers” with those who are merely offended by

says that your exercise of your rights as a knowledgeable Christian may become a stumbling block to others. This gives the picture of placing or leaving an obstacle in someone's path, which causes them to stumble and fall. We are to help each other walk in the right way, not cause them to stumble. So love will consider the possible harm that could come if others follow your example. So with this in mind, consider with me 4 considerations of love regarding questionable moral issues:

A. Love Will Not Lead Another Christian Into Violating His Conscience – In v.10 Paul says, “For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols?” So here is a believer that thinks it is wrong to eat idol meat. But when he sees another believer do it, he decides that it must be OK. So he sits down to eat some idol meat. Then, in v.7 Paul says, “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.” The Christian's conscience should be an instrument of the Holy Spirit. But their conscience, not yet fully trained in the knowledge of God's Word, convicts them of eating meat offered to an idol, and they have sinned against their conscience. Rom. 14:23 says, “But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.” Such a conscience brings confusion, resentment, and feelings of guilt. So your example could actually lead another believer into sin! Would love do that? We should not tempt the weaker Christian to run ahead of his conscience.

B. Love Will Not Lead Another Christian to Return to Former Sins – Some of the Corinthian Christians could not eat idol meat in temple dining halls without recalling the past religious associations that the meat had for them. And suppose they follow your example, and go so far as to eat in an idol temple. Yet, they are not strong enough to fight off the temptations of paganism. They knew the pagan gods were not real, but the wicked practices associated with them were real and fresh on their minds. For such people, it is better that they stay away from the pagan temples completely. This is just like an alcoholic who gets saved. They should stay away from places where alcohol is served. So we must consider the possible harm that may come if others who are weaker and less mature follow our example.

C. Love Considers the Weaknesses & Maturity Level of Others - There is an important principle regarding freedom that even unbelievers understand. Freedom should be exercised based on maturity and strength. A small child is not allowed to play with sharp tools, to go into the street, or to go where there are dangerous machines or electrical appliances. The restrictions are gradually removed as he grows older and learns for himself what is dangerous and what is not. Even secular governments raised the drinking age to 21 because they realized that most teenagers are not mature enough to drink responsibly. And so God confines His spiritual children by conscience, and the immature should submit to the rules set forth by the authority figures in their lives. Then, as they grow in knowledge and maturity, the limits of conscience are expanded. But you must keep in mind that your example may lead a believer into exercising a liberty that he is not yet mature enough to handle.

And let me use the illustration of alcohol. I freely acknowledge that the Bible does not specifically say, “Thou shalt not drink alcohol.” And just suppose that you can *always* drink in

a particular practice. Even less justified is the application of these principles to the “professional weaker brother” – the Christian legalist eager to forbid morally neutral activities even though he or she would never personally indulge in those activities.

moderation, and you never drink to excess (but how can you say that under certain circumstances you would not get drunk). But your son will see you, and say, “Since it’s all right for dad, it’s all right for me.” And suppose your son or daughter is one of the 1 in 15 that becomes an alcoholic from the first drink? And suppose your son or daughter is too weak to handle the peer pressure to drink to the point of drunkenness. It is very possible that your example could lead your child into the sin of drunkenness, or violating his tender conscience, or even death in a car accident. Love for your children should override a personal desire to drink. After all, Jesus said in Mark 9:42: “If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.”

Thus, Paul warns in vv. 11-12, “And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.” “Perish” is placed in an emphatic position in Greek. What is harmless to us may be fatal to others. Then in v.12 Paul describes his conscience being “wounded.” That word was used of the soldiers beating the face of Jesus and wounding Him (Mt. 27.30). Thus you sin against him. What may not be a sin in itself may become a sin if in the exercise of your liberty you hurt someone else. Finally, you thus sin against Christ (v.12b). Why? Because Christ very much identifies Himself with us, as we see in Matthew 10:42 and 25:40. He so identifies Himself with us that any blow struck on us touches Him. Hurting our fellow Christians gets pretty serious doesn’t it?

So once love leads you to consider the impact of an activity upon others, love will lead you to the next step, which is Paul’s final conclusion on the matter:

D. Love Will Lead You to Sacrifice Your Rights and Liberty – Paul says in v.13, “Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.” This is similar to what Paul said in Rom. 14:21, “It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.” There he adds drinking alcohol to the list of things he is willing to give up. Love gives and sacrifices. And what a sacrifice! Can you imagine giving up eating meat? Yet we should follow the loving example of Jesus Christ. He not only gave up position and glory in heaven, but He gave up His right to life and liberty. He died for you, and for me because of love. Notice v.8 again. “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.” Since eating idol sacrifices does nothing to advance us spiritually, the way is open to take account of others’ weakness as determining our action in regard to it.

For years, even while he was mightily used of God to reach thousands for Christ, Charles Spurgeon used tobacco. But the day came when he decided to limit his liberty for the sake of others. You see, one day as he was walking down a London Street, he looked in a tobacco shop and saw a particular brand of tobacco advertised as “the brand that Spurgeon smokes.” He responded by saying, “I’ll never smoke again.”⁶ There are certain things that I and other Christian leaders do not do for this very reason. Yet, I do not gripe and complain about having to give up my liberty. Love is all the motivation I need.

Conclusion: Now I have read the Bible many times. I have advanced degrees in Bible study. And I cannot say that the Bible directly forbids the consumption of alcohol in moderation. So based on knowledge alone, I believe you could make a case for drinking in moderation if you are of legal age. However, we have seen that knowledge is not the only determining factor. Love for others

⁶ Illus.#C-1328 from Vines, 136.

must be our primary consideration. Now let's suppose that you are strong in reference to being able to drink moderately, and *never* get drunk. But let's say you have a 16 year-old boy at home. He sees you drink alcohol. He thinks to himself, "If it's OK for dad, it is OK for me." And so he drinks with some friends one night. But he is not as strong as you. He yields to temptation and drinks to excess. And what would you think if he is one of that statistical minority who becomes an alcoholic from the very first drink? What would you think if he drives home drunk and he and others are killed in an automobile accident. Now tell me, which is more important: your personal liberty to drink, or the life and well-being of others? If we had more love in this country, we would outlaw alcohol, especially hard liquor. If we had more love in this country, we would outlaw gambling in all forms, including state-sponsored gambling. There are too many people who can't handle their gambling additions, and little children are doing without because of it! Love would say, "I'll give up my liberty for the sake of others."

Jesus gave up His rights and privileges for our sake. Let's follow His example, and be willing to give up our rights and liberties for the sake of others.

Now some of you are taking personal liberties in some areas, and if God has convicted you to give those up for the sake of others, then may God help you to do so beginning today.

Sources: Craig Blomberg, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 14 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Paige Patterson, *The Troubled Triumphant Church: an Exposition of First Corinthians* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Jerry Vines, *God Speaks Today: A Study of 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Wise: 1 Corinthians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).