

Title: Love, Liberty and Weak Brethren

Text: 1 Cor 8: 1-13

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Next, Thursday is Christmas Day. Every year I get the same questions. Knowing it originated a pagan “holy day”, knowing Christ was not born on December 25, knowing the idolatry of manger scenes, some believers have nothing to do with it. That is fine until they speak against believers who gather with their families, put up a tree and exchanges gifts. Other believers enjoy the fact that at least one day of the year, the whole world is forced to recognize the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. To some degree, folks are forced to be nice, to give, to spend time with their families. We preach Christ each time we gather, not just one or two days in the year, so it does not alter our worship at all. But these two opinions among believers got me thinking on 1 Corinthians 8.

Things that are indifferent are not to be made into laws. They are not always black and white. Believers worship God in spirit, not in the letter. We must use spiritual discernment. Our liberty varies depending on who is with us at the time. One believer may think that idols or meats or days are defiling. They are wrong to cut off brethren who consider idols, meats and days as nothing at all. Likewise, a believer who understands liberty in Christ should not use his liberty to put a stumblingblock before the weak believer, who does not. We are never to turn grace into law.

Here is the main point: God-given knowledge, together with God-given love, makes true believers seek to edify one another rather than divide, especially over things which are totally indifferent. Our subject is: Love, Liberty and Weak Brethren.

1 Corinthians 8: 1: Now as touching things offered unto idols,...

When idolaters finished their religious services, they sold the meat they offered to idols in the market place. A believer could buy it, take it home and eat it. Or if invited by friends to idolatrous feasts, some believers at Corinth even ate those sacrifices in the idols temple or at festivals. Other believers would not dare eat such meat and had a problem with those who did. So the question is whether a believer should or should not eat the various meats which idolaters offered to their idols. It is not a yes or no answer.

A WORD CONCERNING LOVE

First, mature believers, have knowledge of our liberty from ordinances: touch not, taste not and handle not—“as touching things offered to idols, we know that we all have knowledge.” Our life is in Christ. Therefore, Christ “*is* the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.” (Rom 10: 4) “The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.” (Rom 14: 17) We are not bound by old covenant law in any way. The kingdom of God is concerning our heavenly meat and drink, Christ himself: righteousness in Christ, peace in Christ, joy in Christ. We worship in spirit and in truth in the Holy Spirit.

If men insist we observe ordinances, the apostle Paul told the Colossians, never let men bring us back into subjection to old covenant ordinances. Christ...

Colossians 2: 14: Blott[ed] out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross;...16: Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*: 17: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ....20: Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to

ordinances, 21: (Touch not; taste not; handle not; 22: Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men?

So, mature believers have this knowledge of our liberty in Christ. But knowledge is not enough. Knowledge without true God-given love, makes a man proud, “Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.” (1 Cor 8: 1) Where God gives true knowledge and love in Christ, there is true wisdom. We do not compromise the truth. But believer’s desire for our weaker brethren to be edified rather than us having our own way. Listen to James,

James 3: 13: Who *is* a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. 14: But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. 15: This wisdom descendeth not from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, devilish. 16: For where envying and strife *is*, there *is* confusion and every evil work. 17: But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, *and* easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. 18: And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

But a man with knowledge, who does not have charity, mercy, gentleness and peaceableness, knows nothing as he ought, “And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.” (1 Cor 8: 2) He does not know how to use knowledge wisely: to love, to edify his brethren for the peace of the church. The proud man uses knowledge to please himself, even if it divides brethren and the church. But even, Christ, pleased not himself!

Romans 15: 1: We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2: Let every one of us please *his* neighbour for *his* good to edification. 3: For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me.

Christ did not seek his way. He sought the glory of God and the good of his brethren. So he bore the infirmities of his weak, unfaithful, doubting brethren. When we reproached him while in our unbelief and rebellion, in our self-righteous, haughtiness, he bore our infirmities, even since we have believed him. Yet, he did not cut us off. He bore our weakness; he was patient toward us—even bearing our sins and the stripes we deserved on the cross.

If a believer *does* love, God gets the glory, “But if any man love God, the same is known of him.” (1 Cor 8: 3) Notice, he equates loving our brethren with loving God—because brethren are one with Christ. The Lord Jesus said, “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done *it* unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done *it* unto me.” (Mt 25: 40) When we provide food for one of his hungry brethren, we feed Christ; when we provide clothing to a needy brother, we clothe Christ; when we are charitable to our weak brethren, we love Christ. The Lord Jesus said we are one with Christ, even as God the Father and God the Son are one. (Jn 17: 22)

The believer who loves is “known of God”—“approved of God.” But also, it means he’s made a new creature in Christ by the new birth. God knows us, from everlasting, with everlasting love which is in Christ, having chosen us before time. Christ knew his own when he laid down his life on the cross. He entered the holiest of holies with our names on his breast. Then in our experience of grace, God “knows us”, making us alive and drawing us to himself, to his Son. This is when Christ creates us anew, imparts true knowledge and love in the new heart and makes us willing to follow him in faith. Christ said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: 28: And I give unto them eternal life.” (Jn 10: 27)

Galatians 4: 8: Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. 9: But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage

The believer who is known of God expresses love to Christ by trusting our weaker brethren to Christ, by bearing their infirmities. Remember, when one mother stole the other mother's baby? Solomon said, "Bring sword and split the baby in two." The mother who loved the child said, "No." She would rather see the child live than see it divided. So it is with a believer constrained by Christ's love. When God knows us, God makes his child hate being divisive, and hard-hearted, and proud, and haughty, and insistent on having our way. He makes us love our brethren and seek their good. We may know we are free in Christ. Yet, if we are not charitable to brethren, we know nothing as we ought. And if we *do* love God by loving our brethren, God gets the glory. God has known us and put his love in our hearts.

A WORD CONCERNING LIBERTY

Secondly, believers have liberty in Christ, "As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol *is* nothing in the world, and that *there is* none other God but one." (1 Cor 8: 4) Believers, matured by God's grace, know an idol is nothing; God is the only God; there is no other. Men make idols out of things; we worship God who created the things; men worship special days—we worship God who made all days; men worship dead men—we worship God before whom all men must stand; men cut down trees, carve images, cover in gold and silver, call it a god—we worship God who made those trees, even the tree on which he gave his life to redeem us with his own blood; men worship earthly mt zion, Jerusalem, even that so-called holy temple—We worship God our Savior in spirit and in truth in heavenly Zion, in heavenly Jerusalem in the true holiest of holies.

John 4: 21: Jesus saith unto [the woman at the well], Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. 22: Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. [circumcised in heart, in Spirit, whose praise is of God, not of men] 23: But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. 24 God *is* a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship *him* in spirit and in truth.

Where the inward working of the Spirit is missing, men need outward images and outward works they can see with the carnal eye. Christ's true church worship God in spirit and in truth; idols are nothing in the world to us.

Also, remember: men may call something a god but it does not make it God, "For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) But to us *there is but* one God, the Father, of whom *are* all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom *are* all things, and we by him." (1 Cor 8: 5-6) God in three persons—Father, Son and Spirit—is the only true God. And he is revealed in fullness in one Lord Jesus Christ, "For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily." (Col 2: 9) He is the mighty God, the Everlasting Father. " (Is 9:6)

All things are of him and by him: all things created, all things in providence and all things in grace. True believers are in him and by him: in him as our covenant God, in him by everlasting, immutable love, in him by vital, inseparable union, chosen by him, redeemed by him, reconciled by him, called by him, justified by him, preserved and kept by him, resurrected and glorified by him. So the believer, grown in grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, worship the only true God in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. We know an idol is nothing at all—their days, ceremonies, offerings, images are nothing.

A WORD CONCERNING WEAK BELIEVERS

Still, not all believers, have this knowledge, “Howbeit *there is* not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat *it* as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.” (2 Cor 8: 7) The weak believer sees an idolater slaughter a pig, pray over it, offer it to his idol. The leftovers are great for the smoker. But the weak believer has a superstitious notion that the piece of pork is now impure. He does not fully believe that the idolater’s day is nothing, that his prayers and his ceremony are nothing. He does not realize that his idol is nothing. The meat has not been affected at all!

But if he eats a pulled-pork sandwich from that meat, he does so against his conscience; without fully believing Christ, that he is free to do so, that his completion is unchangeably in Christ alone, not in things or days or observances. So his conscience is defiled, it’s wounded. He has not changed before God in Christ, but the peace in his mind is interrupted.

Yet, be sure to understand, it was not the meat itself that defiled him, “But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse.” (2 Cor 8: 8) Believer, Christ alone commends us to God, not meat, not days, not whether we eat or don’t. We are righteous and holy in Christ at God’s right hand, complete in Christ, and that will never change. This is what Paul meant when he said, “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.” (Gal 6: 15)

Please hear this, “things”—days, meats, ceremonies, etc, never make a believer better or worse. If you eat or if you abstain it does not commend you to God. It is our own sinful heart that defiles us. Christ did not observe the Pharisee’s ceremony. They thought their unwashed hands defiled their food, their food defiled their hearts. He said, “Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.” (Mt 5: 11)

Still, believers are pure in Christ. Things are not unclean in themselves. But when a believer doubts his liberty in Christ, and does a thing without believing on Christ, that is sin.

Romans 14: 14: ...I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that *there is* nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him *it is* unclean... 20: For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed *are* pure; but *it is* evil for that man who eateth with offence... 23: And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

If there be a weak believer who hears this—and you are occupied with whether you should eat this or eat that, observe this day or not—please here me—turn from “things”, turn from you, set your heart on Christ alone, not on things below! Ask Christ to give you an understanding—to make you see your liberty in Christ. Only he can increase faith.

Hebrews 13: 8: Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. 9: Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For *it is* a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein.

Yet, not every believer has this knowledge. So what is a mature believer to do with his liberty before his weak brethren? “But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak. 10: For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol’s temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?” (1 Cor 8: 9-11)

For instance, the weak brother follows your example, contrary to his conscience, not knowing and understanding Christ has set him free indeed. Then afterwards, his weak conscience shall be wounded. His

peace with Christ will be interrupted. He falls into great distress thinking he has sinned against the Lord who bought him

This is one for whom Christ died, yet you have lead this weak sheep into this great trouble in his spirit. Remember, how one our brethren are with Christ?—"But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ." (1 Cor 8: 12) This is the mature believer's constraint; this is why we do not use our liberty to make our weak brethren stumble, "Ye sin against Christ!"

FIVE THINGS

So what are believers to do? Let me briefly give you five things.

One, for the mature believer, "Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend." (1 Cor 8: 13)

Illustration: The believer and the wine

Two, remember, just because a believer thinks he should abstain from certain meat or drink or observe a certain day—does not mean he is not a believer, so receive him but don't doubt him—"Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs." (Rom 14: 1-2)

Three, let not the mature believer despise the weaker brother and let not the weaker judge the mature, "Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him." (Rom 14: 3)

Four, wait on the Lord Jesus to fully persuade your brethren in his own mind, "One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks." (Rom 14: 5-6)

Five, when men try to draw a line and make you take a side, opposing brethren over something that is nothing at all—like Christmas or food and drink and so on—remember, this message. It is not black and white; we must use spiritual discernment. Never draw a line, making it a matter of law. Believers are under grace!

Amen!