

AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?

1 Corinthians 8

Introduction:

Martin Luther, in 1520, published a tract entitled *"On the Freedom of the Christian."* The tract begins with two propositions which seem completely contradictory. He said,

A Christian is an utterly free man, lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is an utterly dutiful man, servant of all, subject to all.

I believe that the Apostle Paul, in the passage we have before us this morning, is dealing with that kind of paradox. In speaking about our freedom in Christ, and our liberty as Christians, he also addresses the importance of considering how our actions and behaviours affect others within the body of Christ and our responsibility to serve others rather than ourselves.

The real question before us today is, what do we do when a fellow believer disagrees with us about how a Christian ought to live? In chapters 8-10 of 1 Corinthians, Paul deals with this question of Christian liberty and freedom.

"Now concerning..." – Paul is responding to another question that has been asked by the Corinthian believers – see 7:1, 25.

"Now concerning food offered to idols..." At first glance, it might seem that this passage is not really relevant to us today. After all, when was the last time someone invited you for a meal and, as you were about to cut into that lovely roast beef, reminded you that it had been consecrated at an altar to Zeus or offered as a sacrifice to Baal. This is not something we face every day.

However, while the specific issues may be different, the principle is just as relevant for us. Over the years various debatable issues have divided believers. Issues like attending certain types of movies, playing cards, the use of alcohol—a glass of wine with a meal—have all been issues with believers on both sides of the question. Today, perhaps an

important issue would be the question of tattoos or body piercings. Is it appropriate for Christians, or are such things linked to occultic or demonic or other evil connections or connotations?

Let's have a look at the text to examine Paul's argument and see what principles we can find that would be applicable to us today.

Love vs. Knowledge vv. 1-3

In order to understand the issue that Paul is addressing in this text, we need to know something of the habits and practices in Corinth in his day. The specific issue was about eating meat offered to idols. What did that entail? I found differing descriptions regarding this practice, but here is the general idea:

When someone brought an animal as a sacrifice or offering to one of the pagan temples, it was divided into three parts.

One part of the meat was burned as an offering to a deity – an idol. Barclay, in his commentary, says that sometimes that was a mere token part, as small as some of the hair cut from the forehead. Another part given to the priest of the temple and was eaten or served at a meal in honor of the deity. The third part was sold to merchants and subsequently sold in the marketplace.

So, the question was, how should Christians deal with this? The best meat at the best price was to be found in the market, and usually came from this very source. If it had been consecrated to a false god, was it appropriate for a Christian to partake of that meat? Some said yes, some no.

We may not deal with this particular issue today, but the question of Christian liberty remains. When is it appropriate to participate in certain practices? What if someone else feels differently about it than I do? Note that we are not talking about things that God has said are always wrong...

Paul gives us a couple of very important principles in the first half of this chapter. Listen - *read vv. 1-3.* We all have knowledge. But when we use that knowledge to berate or criticize someone else, it is not helpful. In fact, Paul says that focusing on what we know leads to an inflated

opinion of ourselves and does not show love to others. Even more, he suggests that when we believe that we know more than other people, we in fact are lacking in true knowledge.

What we really need is love for others. Knowledge, he says, “puffs up,” but love “builds up.” Our goal, in Christian relationships and in disagreements is not to bring down others but to build them up, and what is needed for that is love. So the first important principle is that love supersedes knowledge.

Knowledge Used Rightly vv. 4-6

After having pointed out the danger of knowledge, Paul goes on to use knowledge in a right and good manner. In vv. 4-6 he says, here is what we do know. This is common knowledge—things we can all agree on – *read vv. 4-6*. So what do we know?

- There is only one true God.
- Idols are not real – any power they appear to have is only a figment of man’s imagination.
- Since they are not real, any ceremony offering an animal in sacrifice to an idol is completely meaningless.
- Consequently, there is no connection between the food we eat and spirituality.

So, then it really doesn’t matter. Let’s just jump in and go ahead and eat. There isn’t any problem with eating meat offered to idols, right? Well ... not so fast. It’s not quite that simple. In the next section we come to the question of...

Liberty vs. Responsibility vv. 7-13

“However...” (NIV – “But...”) – Paul immediately qualifies his argument. Let’s see what he says – *read vv. 7-13*.

Our freedom in Christ is controlled and dictated by our conscience. What is the conscience? One definition I found said it this way: “*Conscience is the judge within that commends us for doing right & condemns us for doing wrong.*” Our conscience develops and grows stronger as we grow in our spiritual understanding. As that happens we grow to appreciate more and more our freedom in Christ.

But, there are circumstances that may affect how some people see certain activities. Paul points out that former association with idols may still be affecting their freedom to enjoy that meat. Their conscience leaves them feeling guilty. We must be careful not to cause that person to stumble.

One preacher I was reading made this profound statement: “*The weak believer must not **run ahead** of his conscience & the strong believer must **never force** him to do so!*”

You see, our Christian liberty is controlled by our conscience, but it must also be tied to our Christian responsibility to our fellow believers.

Look at the points the Apostle Paul makes here:

- Food will not commend us to God – v. 8. What we eat does not make us any better or worse in and of itself. So, what about enjoying a glass of wine with your meal? Or getting a tattoo or a ring in your lip? No, those things will neither commend us nor condemn us. But, Paul says...
- Be careful that your actions do not become a stumbling block to another Christian who may have a weaker conscience – v. 9. When someone whose conscience tells him he should not do something sees you doing it, he may be encouraged to go ahead and follow your example, while at the same time he is feeling guilty and condemned. The result is that his relationship with God, and his spiritual vitality is hindered.
- When you cause another believer to sin by engaging in something that his conscience tells him is wrong, Paul says you are really sinning against God – v. 12

Conclusion

So, what is the bottom line in all of this? The overriding principle is the importance of love. As Christians, our liberty is controlled by our conscience; our conscience is strengthened by knowledge regarding God’s grace; and knowledge is balanced by love! *Refer back to verse 1* – “Knowledge puffs up but love builds up.” If Christ loved our brothers and sisters enough to die for them, we ought to love enough to not cause them to stumble.

Paul's conclusion is that he will limit his own rights and freedoms in order to support and build up his fellow Christians – *read v. 13*. He goes on in the next chapter to develop further the argument concerning his freedom in Christ and his rights as a believer and as an apostle. But, he is very clear that he will never use that freedom to cause someone else to sin or to stumble in their walk with Christ.

So, let me close with a few questions:

- Are there activities or places that are off limits to you, but may not be to other Christians? Or the other way around?
- Are there things from your background, from your pre-Christian days that affect the liberties your conscience allows?
- Are you willing to limit or restrict your freedom to do certain things for the sake of others who may stumble in their walk with God because of your actions?

Above all, remember, the basic principle is LOVE. Do you love your brothers and sisters in Christ enough to say with the Apostle Paul...

“Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.”