

Freedom That Binds

In a little over a month, we'll begin the Great American Food Festival. Beginning with Thanksgiving and ending with New Year's, we have five weeks during which we eat pretty much everything in sight. So, before it all begins, I thought I'd give you a few holiday dieting tips.

1. If no one sees you eat it, it has no calories.
2. If you drink a diet soda with a candy bar, they cancel each other out.
3. Cookie pieces contain no calories because the process of breakage causes calorie leakage.
4. If you eat standing up, the calories all go to your feet and get walked off.

Even if those four are just wishful thinking, this last one is absolutely true ...

5. The word STRESSED is just DESSERTS spelled backwards.¹

The first three words of 1 Corinthians 8, then, are most appropriate for this time of year:

Now concerning food ... (1 Cor. 8:1)

However, even if on the surface this chapter APPEARS to be all about food, it actually has next to nothing to do with food and everything to do with people, especially Christians and their relationships with one another. The Corinthians thought the issue was food. Paul wanted them to see that the real issue was soul food.

In this chapter, Paul STATES the principle, then he DEBATES the principle, and finally, he RELATES the principle to our lives. Since this truth comes through Paul from Jesus, we need to take this lesson very seriously. First, listen as...

I. Paul States the Principle.

1 Corinthians 7:1 begins, *"Now concerning the matters about which you wrote..."* So, Paul has been asked about several practical issues. In chapter 8, he addresses food that's been offered to idols. The question is whether or not it was right for a Christian to eat it. For us to understand this, we need some background. In Corinth, as was true in most Greco-Roman cities, Christians had to deal with realities that we don't face today, at least not in America. If they wanted the cheapest and best meat, they had to buy it at the pagan temple meat market. Why? Because non-Christians believed that the best meat should be offered to the temple gods. After it was offered to the gods, it was taken to the Temple meat market and sold, making a profit for the temple. So, the best meat at the lowest price was found at the temple market.

But this whole "meat offered to the gods" thing introduced a point of contention in the church. You see, some Christians believed that these so-called gods weren't really gods at all. So, they knew that this "temple meat" was no different from any other meat. Therefore, they had no problem buying and eating meat from the temple market.

But other Christians, especially newer ones, didn't look at it that way. Their heads said temple meat was no different from other meat, but their emotions said something different. It "felt" to them like they were being unfaithful to God. So, following their

conscience, they refused to eat any meat that had anything to do with temple idol worship.

Now, you might be thinking, “But pastor, we don’t have “food offered to idols,” so how is this relevant to us?” Is this really about food, or is this about relationships? Listen again to verses 1-3:

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. (1 Cor. 8:1-3)

This is a most profound statement. Paul is comparing the two Greek concepts of *gnosis* (knowledge) and *agape* (love). The Greek understanding of knowledge is very much like ours. It’s the possession of information on a certain topic. But the biblical understanding of love is quite different from our understanding of love. *Agape* love is unconditional, sacrificial. In its purest form, it refers to a love that God is, that God shows and that God is capable of making observable by His Spirit through the actions of people whose hearts are yielded to Him.²

Now, notice what Paul says about the connection between “knowledge” and “love.” He says that ‘agape love,’ this sacrificial love that only God can give, trumps human knowledge. Watch his train of thought ...

... This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. 1 Cor.8:1-3

If love comes first; if sacrificial, divine love supersedes human knowledge, then the person who has that love flowing through him or her will live in a higher knowledge, a higher truth; the truth of being known by God. In chapter 10 Paul states:

“All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. (1 Cor. 10:23)

Dr. J. Vernon McGee puts it this way, “Love doesn’t blow up, it fills up.” The principle is this: Our knowledge must be completed by love. Now, I ask you: Is that a relevant principle that can help us in the divided world in which we live? Secondly...

II. Paul Now Debates the Principle.

In verse four, Paul plainly states his position on the meat issue:

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” (1 Cor. 8:4)

At this point, when this letter was first read in Corinth, I can just see all the meat-eating Christians smiling a knowing smile to one another and sitting up just a little bit straighter, thinking to themselves, “Well, there you have it, the word straight from the top! We have freedom to eat anything we want.”

But just as the meat-eaters are picking up their walking sticks and heading for the door, Paul’s next sentence stopped them in the aisle:

However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. (1 Cor. 8:7)

Now, all the non-meat eaters jump to their feet and started high fiving each other. “See, see?” they start saying. “I knew ‘ol Paul would come through. He’s one of us!” And that whole group starts chanting, “No meat, no meat, no meat, no meat.” This, of

course, gets the meat-eaters all jacked up, so they join hands in a pious circle and start to sing:

“Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace...

“More meat, (no meat!) more meat (no meat!)”

And thus was born the first two Christian denominations!

One Bible teacher said it this way, “Knowledge without love is brutality, but love without knowledge is hypocrisy.”³ Paul’s target audience here is really the spiritually mature. In a sense, he’s saying, “Your knowledge is not wrong, but how will you use it? Pure doctrine can be a weapon with which you tear down or a tool with which you build up. Which is it gonna be?”

What’s the principle again? **Knowledge must be completed by love.** The first century was definitely NOT the only century to debate how this principle was to be lived out. It was debated then and it’s been debated every century since. And since God has preserved this letter for all generations, the apostle Paul immediately moves from debating the principle to RELATING the principle. So thirdly, we must see...

III. How He Relates the Principle to Real Life.

What might be the “meat offered to idols” today? I believe Satan himself was behind the meat/no meat controversy in Corinth, using it to try to fulfill his mission of dividing and destroying the entity he most fears, the Church of Jesus Christ. His mission has not changed in our day. He wants to divide the Church! Therefore, I believe he is behind the debates today over mask/no mask and vaccine/no vaccine. And just as in Corinth, there are devout Christians on both sides of this potentially divisive issue.

What’s fascinating to me is Paul’s solution to the crisis. It was NOT to tell those with whom he theologically disagreed to just “Get in line! Stop this nonsense about the meat being cursed! I’m issuing a mandate that you eat the blasted meat or be removed from the church!” No, no; he gives no direction to those with whom he disagrees. Do you see that? Instead, completing his knowledge with agape, Paul makes his appeal to those with whom he agrees! Listen to verses 7-9 from The Message:

We need to be sensitive to the fact that we’re not all at the same level of understanding in this. ... But fortunately God doesn’t grade us on our diet. We’re neither commended when we clear our plate nor reprimanded when we just can’t stomach it. [Is it possible then, that God doesn’t care if you’re vaccinated or not?] But God does care when you use your freedom carelessly in a way that leads a fellow believer still vulnerable to those old associations to be thrown off track.

For those of you who believe everyone should be vaccinated because, if you aren’t, you’re endangering others, let me explain something. Most Christians who refuse to be vaccinated are doing so because they understand that all the vaccines have included aborted fetal tissue somewhere in their development. They reject the vaccine then, to avoid disobeying the sixth commandment, believing that abortion is murder. They are not acting selfishly. Their consciences won’t allow them to violate God’s law.

Then, in verses 27 through 30 of chapter 10, Paul says, again to the meat-eaters, that if you’re invited to someone’s house and they serve you meat offered to idols, go ahead and eat it. But if someone at the party says, “I can’t eat this because of my Christian conscience,” then, you should say, “Me neither.” Do you see his point? His point is this: In a public setting, your freedom is not the most important thing. Do what

you want in private on these debatable matters, but in public, where other Christians are present, let THEIR conscience set YOUR boundaries.

Again, Eugene Peterson's translation is most helpful:

For instance, say you flaunt your freedom by going to a banquet thrown in honor of idols, where the main course is meat sacrificed to idols. Isn't there great danger if someone still struggling over this issue, someone who looks up to you as knowledgeable and mature, sees you go into that banquet? The danger is that he will become terribly confused – maybe even to the point of getting mixed up himself in what his conscience tells him is wrong.

Christ gave up his life for that person. Wouldn't you at least be willing to give up going to dinner for him – because, as you say, it doesn't really make any difference? But it *does* make a difference if you hurt your friend terribly, risking his eternal ruin! When you hurt your friend, you hurt Christ. A free meal here and there isn't worth it at the cost of even one of these “weak ones.” (1 Cor. 8:10-13 MSG)

His point? We can be right in our knowledge and all wrong in our spirit. Or, we can temporarily suspend our rights, give up a freedom that is truly ours, by accepting a binding limitation. And if we do that, it will most often diffuse the conflict and even lead someone else to a greater freedom than they've ever known. What might that look like?

Watchman Nee tells about a Chinese Christian who owned a rice paddy next to one owned by a communist man. The Christian irrigated his paddy by pumping water out of a canal, using one of those leg-operated pumps that makes it look like you're riding a stationary bicycle. Every time, however, that the Christian pumped water into his field, the communist would come out at night and remove a few boards and let all the water run from the Christian's field into his. That way, he didn't have to pump.

[When confronted about this, the communist denied it.] The Christian wasn't sure what to do, so he prayed, “Lord, if this keeps up, I'm going to lose all my rice. I've got a family to feed. What can I do? [My rights are being trampled!]”

That night, the Lord put a thought in the Christian's mind. The next morning, he got up extra early and started pumping water... into his neighbor's field! Then, he put the boards in place and filled his own field. In a few weeks, the rice in both fields was doing well – AND the communist, his neighbor, asked how he could become a follower of Christ.⁴

The apostle Paul was one of the freest men who ever lived. Yet, he regularly bound himself, restricted his lifestyle, even disciplined his diet. Why? For the sake of a deceived person's soul. Here's Paul's concluding statement:

Therefore, if food (if wearing a mask or if NOT wearing a mask) makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat (wear a mask again or I will always wear a mask in his presence), lest I make my brother stumble. (1 Cor. 8:13)

His plea is to the mature, to those who have the most freedom. His request is this, “Would you be willing to suspend temporarily some of your freedom so that those who have next-to-no-freedom could have more?” The question isn't, “How much do you love others?” The question is, “How much do you really want to be like Christ?”

Archbishop Secker wrote:

God has three sorts of servants in the world: some are slaves, and serve Him from fear; others are hirelings, and serve for wages; and the last are sons [and daughters], who serve because they love.⁵

Why are you serving God? Are you serving because you fear Him? That's the attitude of a slave, someone who thinks constantly about his rights. Or, are you serving God because of the wages, the "perk" of going to heaven? That's the attitude of an employee. Most employees don't really have a close relationship with their boss. Or, are you serving God because you know you are His much-loved child? Verse 3 says:

But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. (1 Cor. 8:3)

Isn't that what we really want most? We desperately want to be known as we truly are. Not the "smiley-face" us, not the "dressed-up-for-Sunday" us, not the "act-your-age" us. No, the real us. You see, what are we really looking for at the "temple meat markets" in our world? It's not the meat, is it? Aren't we looking for someone who, when they find out who we really are, won't walk away? God issues this invitation to you through the prophet Isaiah:

**"Come, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!**

**Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.**

**Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy? ...**

**Incline your ear, come to me;
hear, that your soul may live ... (Is. 55:1-3)**

Our God says, "If you will take the risk of loving Me, you will gain the certainty that I know you AND I accept you. I love you warts and all." That's when you'll experience real freedom! Freedom isn't doing whatever you want. **Freedom is having someone who knows every one of your deepest secrets, yet He loves you still.** Do you have THAT kind of freedom today? If you will take the risk of loving God, He'll show you the truth and THAT truth, His truth, will set you free. So free, that you'll be able to offer some of your freedom to others. Take the risk! Declare your love for God right now and be set free! Let's pray.

¹ From website www.hungrymonster.com/humor/Jokes

² www.preceptaustin.org/Love-Agape (Greek Word Study)

³ Ibid. p. 88.

⁴ Dr. Paul Faulkner, *Making Things Right When Things Go Wrong* (West Monroe: Howard Publishing, 1996)

⁵ Rev. Kent Hughes, *1001 Great Stories & Quotes* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998), p. 383