

SOCIAL DRINKING, DANCING, MOVIES, AND OTHER SINS

1 Corinthians 8

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Our Scripture today is 1 Corinthians 8. We continue in our study of Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

“Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God. So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees who have this knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, won’t he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 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” (1 Corinthians 8:1–13, NIV).

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My sermon title is “Social drinking, Dancing, Movies, and Other Sins.” What does that sermon title have to do with eating meat offered to idols? The underlying principles are the same. Only the issues have changed. There are variations of conscience and conviction among Christians living in a particular culture.

Several years ago, when I was in ministry in Eastern Europe among our Eastern European Pentecostal brethren, there it was regarded as sin to attend a soccer game or movie theater or for women to wear pant suits. There was no conviction at all in respect the drinking of beer.

How do we explain these differences among believers? Believers who worship the same God, love the same Lord, read the same Bible. If we understand how we got the differences, how do we get resolution of the differences? How do we address the issue?

That’s the focus of 1 Corinthians 8–10. Actually, 1 Corinthians 8 finds Paul beginning to answer the second question that has been asked him by believers at Corinth. The first question in a letter to him was asked in 1 Corinthians 7, respecting marriage and sexuality. The second question that troubled them, that they wanted apostolic counsel on, was: should we eat meat (the word is better translated “meat” than “food,” because we’re talking about meat, not vegetables) should offered to idols?

There are three ways that that question impacted the daily life of a Corinthian believer. Let me relate those three ways before we get into the contemporary application of the issue.

If you, as a Christian, were invited to a non-Christian friend’s house and he sat before you with meat, and you knew that before that animal had been killed it had been offered in the temple and sacrificed to a god, an idol. Or if you knew that that meat, when brought into the house, had been offered in dedication to the god of that home or if that meal began with an invocation, dedicating the meat to that god, would you, as a Christian, then feel at liberty to eat that meat?

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There were Christians who were struggling deeply with that issue.

A second way in which the issue impacted them was the fact that the most cheap meat was bought at the butcher shop across from the temple, where the butcher shop would be in most Greek cities. Because the animals were sacrificed in the temple, they were slain in dedication before the god, the priest might receive part of the animal but the rest of the animal, if given in an offering, would go back to the butcher shop, often at a reduced rate. So if you knew that hamburger costs a dollar and eighty-nine cents a pound, but you knew that, if you went down to the butcher shop across from the temple, you could get the meat of an animal sacrificed to an idol for a dollar and twenty-nine cents a pound, would you be justified in saving the sixty cents a pound to buy the meat if it had first been offered to an idol? Christians didn't know how to respond to that. Of course, meat buying in Middle Eastern countries is very different than here. You go where there's meat hanging up on racks and the flies are buzzing around. You indicate the section of meat you want cut off. It's less sophisticated than what we have, less sanitized.

A third area that caused trouble was that when they went to a public banquet—a civic function that often was held on public ground, as civic functions were, maybe it was the meeting, the annual banquet of the chamber of commerce or the city council having some extravaganza—the meat that was eaten at that banquet had been slain as an act of dedication to the patron deity of that temple. Your name was Erastus and you were a Christian at Corinth and you were the director of public works that Romans 16 tells us about. There was a man at Corinth named Erastus who was director of the city public works, a level two of management. He had to go to these things quite often. Does he eat? Does he attend such an event? Or does he not? That's why the issue was raised. I suspect that, just by restating the issue, you'll think those are kind of tough questions to answer.

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When you look at Paul's response, I think you're free to raise several questions as I have done.

Can knowledge solve this issue?

Verses 1–3 talk about that. That is, if you know the right doctrine, does that solve the issue? And by the way, knowledge does solve some issues. If someone were to ask, "Does the New Testament really teach that Jesus Christ physically rose from the dead?" We have clear knowledge on that point. That's not a matter that's up for debate. It shouldn't be up for debate among Christians at all.

But there are other issues where maybe knowledge doesn't present a solution. One of the Corinthian watchwords was, "We all possess knowledge." That was evidently a phrase, a slogan used by some Corinthian Christians who were exercising their freedom as a Christian more than some of the others. They would say, when they looked at this letter, "An idol doesn't have any real identity at all. So, therefore, there couldn't possibly be anything wrong with eating meat offered to an idol, because an idol is nothing. Nothing happened to the meat. It's got to be ok. We all possess that knowledge. There's one God. The idol can't be a god so, therefore, it's perfectly legitimate to eat the meat." Then, since we all possess knowledge, they would say, of the brother down the road who objected to that and who had problems with his conscience, "Anybody who differs from us just isn't educated enough. They're narrow-minded, bigoted. They need to be free from their overly strict conscience and we're here to liberate them. And if they don't like it, tough."

That kind of knowledge had some problems.

That kind of knowledge can result in intellectual pride rather than spiritual progress. A person can actually have sort of a slogan about things they participate in or maybe don't participate in, and begin to wear it as a badge to spirituality. Like "I don't smoke, I don't chew, I don't go with

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guys who do.” As if they couldn’t do other things wrong. As if, just because you refrain from those things, that would somehow make you holy.

There are some people who feel that maybe they’re spiritual because they don’t smoke. Maybe they have tongues that are sharper than a double-edged razor. On the other extreme, there are some people who indulge in some liberty to prove how liberated they really are. Their watchword is, “There’s nothing wrong with that.” You can substitute practically anything for the word “that.” “There’s nothing wrong in that.”

Knowledge, Paul says, puffs up. Love builds up. J. B. Philips translates chapter 8:1 this way, “We should remember that, while knowledge may make a man look big, it is only love that can make him grow to his full stature. Some issues cannot be decided on the basis of knowledge alone. Knowledge may only give a person an exaggerated sense of self-importance or position. Love builds up.”

Another area in which knowledge may be of no help is if it fails to demonstrate humility. 1 Corinthians 8:2 says, “The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know what he ought to know.” What a classic statement! Knowledge is always, at best, incomplete. Knowledge becomes proud when it thinks it knows everything or that it’s learned so much. But wisdom is always humble, because it recognizes that it knows so little. Demonstrating uncertainty in some areas can be a mark of Christian character rather than attempting to pronounce an opinion on every issue.

Knowledge can also be of no help if it may pretend to measure one’s relationship with God.

There were Christians at Corinth who felt superior to other Christians because of their knowledge: “What’s the matter with these dim-witted Christians who don’t have the freedom that we do?” It often is the case in some particular area of what I might define as a “cultural sin,”

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that is, a practice that is not necessarily condemned in Scripture but, on the other hand, practiced by the majority of the Christian community, it's possible that by abstaining from something like that a person can begin to measure their spirituality.

I think back to my own experience as a young person growing up in an atmosphere where a lot of things were wrong. I went to a camp meeting in Arkansas at the age of sixteen. This one camp meeting speaker was always one of my favorites. Many of you would recognize him. He was a steam-winder! There's something glorious about the silver tongue and the ability to captivate an audience through rhetoric. I've always wanted that gift and I recognize that I'm more of a plodder than a speaker, not the William Jennings Bryan or anything like that. But this person had that kind of tremendous oratorical skill. In the midst of one of his sermons, he was talking to the women of the congregation about the need to abstain from wearing certain cosmetics. To use the illustration, he said, "Many of you farmers, here, know what it's like to have an old barn on your property that needs paint. What do you do when it needs painting? You go out and paint it a bright red. But when that old barn catches on fire, the first thing that begins to crackle and peel is that old red paint. And some of you ladies," he said, "when you catch on fire, the first thing that begins to catch on fire..." There were many people who sincerely bought that—hook, line and sinker. Some, however, bought it from the standpoint that somehow, by refraining from that practice, you become a more spiritual person.

Sideburns, length of hair, all of these kinds of issues can become somehow bound up in what constitutes "spirituality," and knowledge can give a kind of false concept of walking with God.

The most basic kind of knowledge is the knowledge of God. Not knowledge about God, or knowledge about certain practices.

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That's what Paul says in verse 3, "The man who loves is known by God." He doesn't say, "The man who knows all about God is known by God. If you pass the theological exam and get 99.3 percent, you're known by God." No, it's the man or woman who loves who's known by God. I enjoyed, from time to time, teasing my mom. One day, a number of years ago, I got into a conversation with her. We somehow got to talking about the doctrine of the Trinity. I began throwing at her classic textbook sort of questions in respect to the doctrine of the Trinity. Here's a person who's been a Christian for over sixty years, a missionary and pastor's wife and the like. She didn't know the correct answers to some of the questions I was raising in respect to the doctrine of the Trinity. She believed in a triune God, but her answers didn't come out to the degree of certitude that I would have expected of a church doctrine class in college or something like that. I began razzing her. Then I realized, after I got done with that experience of kidding her, that in spite of the fact that mom didn't know the doctrine of the Trinity as well as I did, she knew God a lot better than I did. It dawned on me that it's far different to know something about God and to know God.

That's precisely what Paul is saying here. "He or she who loves God is known by God." So don't measure your walk with God on the basis that you have some liberty or maybe have practiced some legalism. That's not where the relationship is.

If there are limits to knowledge, how does knowledge relate to these issues which we have raised (the eating issues and the issues I've raised in my sermon title)?

Knowledge, in verses 4–8, does help in some ways.

I. First of all, in verses 4–6, we see that knowledge helps us draw correct conclusions through the proper application of God's Word or God's revelation.

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Paul does this. He agrees with the “knowledge” at Corinth. He says, “You’re right. An idol has no use. It means nothing.” Actually, the word “idolatry” is a combination of two Greek words together—“appearance,” “a copy,” and “to serve.” To worship an appearance, a copy.

What Paul is really saying is that there is no reality that stands behind the copy. Do you have an idol of Zeus? There’s no such being as Zeus that stands behind it. It’s a copy. It’s not even a copy of the original. It’s a copy without an original ever having been made. Therefore, it’s nothing.

And meat offered to a nothing is nothing. You don’t have to worry about it, theologically. By drawing a proper application, we know that there is one God and one Lord Jesus Christ. That one God, that one Lord Jesus Christ is the only reality. So on the knowledge side, knowledge drawn to the proper conclusion should lead to the viewpoint that there is nothing theologically wrong, so to speak, in eating meat offered to idols. An idol is not reality. God is.

That’s very well in regard to meat. But what about social drinking?

There are a great many opinions among Christians on the subject. The one extreme holds that all wine in the Bible should simply be translated grape juice. That Jesus, for example, would never drink anything that even had a smidgen of alcoholic content. The viewpoint on the other hand holds that Christians are free, therefore, to celebrate in a regular way the benefits of an alcoholic drink. Where is truth in the midst of all of this and can knowledge say anything about that? What can we do in regard to drawing proper conclusions from Scripture on this issue?

One of the best resources I’ve found in this whole discussion is an article by Dr. Robert H. Stein, professor of New Testament in Bethel Seminary, St. Paul. It appeared in 1975 in *Christianity Today* magazine. It was called “Wine drinking in New Testament Times.” He had done an exploration of the culture of the biblical period, the Greek culture and the Jewish culture. He

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came up with some rather fascinating conclusions. His position was that biblical wine was neither grape juice nor Morgan David. Paul did not tell Timothy to drink grape juice, for example. Nor did he tell bishops and deacons, in 1 Timothy 3, to not drink too much grape juice. He told them that they must not be addicted to much wine. And the word “wine” is used in regard to the Passover celebration. It’s not grape juice. We know that by Jewish practices.

Dr. Stein indicates to us that, in the process of wine drinking, there were three words which must be kept in mind. One is *amphorae*, which is a Greek word that described the container where the fruit of the vine was stored. It was poured into an *amphorae* and there fermented. They didn’t have the refrigeration we have now. But wine was not poured straight from the *amphorae* into the cup. After it had been in the *amphorae*, it was then poured into what was called a *krater*, a mixing bowl. There was a proportionate amount of water added. And the parts of water might vary, all the way from nine or ten parts water to one part wine, to as high as one part water, one part wine. Stronger drinks would be even less part water. From the *krater*, the *kylax*, the cup received. The cup never received the wine from the *amphorae*. It received the wine from the *krater*. The ration of water to wine varied in Greek life and Jewish life.

I won’t deal with the Greek life, but just mention what the average person would partake of in respect to drinking the wine in the Jewish life. The Talmud is the book of Jewish tradition. What the specific part of the Talmud I referred to would be the part which covers Talmudic or rabbinic laws developed two hundred years before Christ to two hundred years after Christ. It gives us, at one point, an idea of what Passover wine was. It was specifically described in the Talmud as three parts water to one part wine. To use a comparison on this, to consume the amount of alcohol that is in two martinis by drinking wine that is three parts water to one part wine, one would have to drink over twenty-two glasses to have the same effect. In other words, it’s

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possible to become intoxicated from Passover wine that is three parts water to one part wine. But one's drinking would probably affect one's bladder before it would affect one's mind.

Drinking one part water to one part wine, on the other hand, was frowned upon. Although Proverbs, on the one hand, revels in the fact that God gave wine. On the other hand, Proverbs turns right around and talks about the evils of strong drink. Strong drink, simply being too much wine to too little water.

I think, therefore, knowledge of the Scripture gives kind of a better picture of what is involved in wine drinking.

What about dancing? Another area in the sermon. I was brought up with the viewpoint that all dancing is a sin. That is so firmly ingrained in my conscience that I must confess that I even get edgy at liturgical dancing, a play that somebody would do up here on the platform where somebody would do a folk dance. I've never confessed this, but I even got nervous when the kids put on a little program where there was some dancing in it. I was so strongly taught that this was wrong. And there were good reasons, by the way, for that teaching.

As a young person, I even got nervous when people danced in the Spirit. I saw that on more than one occasion.

What about dancing? I think we can be mature enough to recognize that dancing can be right or it can be wrong. Depending upon the motive, social context, the place, the spirit, the results. But it's hard, just in one kind of blow, to say that all dancing is right or all dancing is wrong. A great deal depends upon motive, social context, the kind of things that happen, the sort of music that's involved, the kind of fruit that is borne to it. I think knowledge can help us look at that.

What about movies? I think if we're going to ask what about movies or attendance at the theaters, we've got to raise all the arts in one blow. We shouldn't isolate movies. We should talk

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about TV, magazines, books. It seems a little bit inconsistent for a Christian to, on the one hand, advocate a position that you should not go see a G-rated film, and on the other hand, watch soap operas on television in the afternoons, which is definitely not G-rated material, from what I'm given to understand.

Philippians 4:8 ought to be a rule of thumb for all the arts, in our reading, our watching.

Everything out to be involved in the principles of Philippians 4:8 "Whatever things are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable think on these." We should not deliberately allow our mind and our conscience to become soiled by the world's view of life.

II. If we can apply knowledge to certain areas and say knowledge gives us a theological frame of reference for handling these kinds of things, we ought to recognize that knowledge may be absent in some cases, because of conscience.

That's what Paul says in verses 7–8. It's ok to eat meat offered to idols, since idols don't exist—but not everybody knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that, when they eat such food, they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol. If their conscience is weak, it is defiled. All their life, they've grown up eating every meal dedicated to an idol. Now they're eating that same kind of food that's been offered to idols and they say, "This smacks too much of my past life." Am I really serving Christ? Their conscience is smitten by that practice.

Paul indicates that those who do not eat meat offered to idols have a weak conscience rather than a strong one. Why is it a weak conscience? Because it has not been fully informed by the Word of God. The Word of God would free the conscience to its proper capability. Sometimes tradition limits a conscience, therefore, it is weak. By the way, this word "conscience" is simply a word that means "to know one's self." That's basically the idea of it. "Knowledge together with" is the literal translation. And conscience is, first of all, shaped broadly in each human being by the act

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of creation. Paul says in Romans 1 that all mankind has a certain kind of knowledge in conscience. A conscience that says God exists and a conscience where God has indicated moral boundaries for the human race. Beyond that, our conscience is developed by our family, by our church, by tradition, by culture.

A weak conscience is a conscience which functions on insufficient knowledge.

When I was growing up, I learned that you could take an inflatable round pigskin or leather or rubber object, blow it up to its proper size, bounce it down a wooden court, throw it through a hoop with a net, and that was ok. You could take an elliptical object made out of pigskin or rubber, blow it up, kick it and run up and down with it across green grass, and run it across a line, and that was also ok. I could take a little wooden ball and hit it with a mallet through an iron wicket across green grass and that was also ok. But it was somehow wrong to take a smaller wooden ball and hit it with a stick across a green felt table into a pocket. Of course, there was a good reason for that. Many of the places where that game was played were not the most hospitable places for the strengthening of the Christian life. But at the same time, the first time I ever picked up a stick to hit the ball, I thought twice because my conscience was weak, not fully informed. Of course, there's no difference between hitting a small wooden ball across a green felt table and hitting a larger wooden ball with a mallet across a green lawn. No difference at all. But my conscience was weak. It was not fully informed.

A billiard game does not bring me closer to God. I am no worse if I don't play and no better if I do.

What applications govern our response to these issues? If we know, on the one hand, that knowledge gives us a certain kind of freedom, knowledge may be limited by a weak conscience.

What application governs our response?

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The first application is rather obvious, in verse 9. What might be safe for one person may not be safe for another. Be careful that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

Two things might be said about what is safe for one person and might not be for another. On the one hand, one person's freedom might be able to help another person to freedom. That's why Paul says, "Be careful." He doesn't explicitly exclude all practices where a person has knowledge and say, therefore, "Always cater your conduct to the person who has a weak conscience." He says, "Be careful lest it become a stumbling block." In other words, you, as the knowledgeable Christian, are called upon to exercise judgment as to that conduct you participate in, whether it will lead to stumbling or whether it won't. You have to be responsible for that knowledge. There is, by the way, a tremendous difference here between refraining from a course of action because someone's prejudices are going to be irritated versus refraining from a course of action because a person is legitimately going to stumble. That involves dealing with their spirit.

Paul, for example, didn't hesitate to, in effect, rub a bologna sandwich in the nose of the Galatian church. Remember when Peter was eating non kosher foods with the Gentile Christians and the Judaizer party came up from Jerusalem saying, "Peter shouldn't do that." Peter acted insincerely. He withdrew and started eating kosher food again. Paul says, "Nothing doing!" They're making that a test of salvation. They're saying, "You're not a Christian if you eat non-kosher food. They cannot do that." He said, "I withstood Peter to his face" (Galatians 2:11).

But we're talking about a far different matter when a person who has a weak or not sufficiently informed conscience, who buys the actions of older Christians, will actually be led into bondage. Why? Because by violating their conscience, they will then stand guilty and condemned before

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God and it will allow them to begin to even participate in the breaking down of their conscience of areas where there should be no breaking down at all. It can set up a chain of events. That's what Paul is really saying.

One person's freedom may lead to another person's downfall. We should never ask, as Christians, how does this affect me? And then be content with that. We have to ask, not only how does it affect me, but, how does it affect my brother? And "brother" here is used three times in this passage.

I had a very vivid demonstration of this a couple years ago in my office. I had a mother and son who are not part of this church. They had come to me and had just recently been converted out of the occult. The boy, a bright young boy—sharp and good looking and eagerly interested in the things of God—was suffering some after-effects of the involvement with the occult. The impact that séances had had on his life—astrological books, levitation, and other matters. It was surprising—the depth of cultic experiences he had had as a boy that young. He had great difficulty sleeping at night.

I began exploring with him what was happening in his life and learned that his room was full of cultic object that had not really been cleansed. I reminded him of the experience in Acts 19, where, at Ephesus, the believers got rid of the cultic objects and burned them in a fire. I felt that one of the keys toward the healing of his own situation was to rid himself of these influences of the past. I know that, on an intellectual level, when you're doing a study of comparative religions, there is not necessarily anything wrong with reading what somebody has to say about the occult. But we're talking about an eleven-year-old boy who was in that stuff and for whom it was a snare. We kept talking. I noticed his eyes going to something on my desk. I thought, I wonder if, in his experience with the occult, he recognizes what I have on my desk. Should I say

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anything about it or not? I finally decided, whether he does or not, I can't take that chance. I'd better explain what's on my desk.

I had a Tibetan chorten. My parents were missionaries in Tibet. A chorten is a little replica of a larger chorten, that is about man-size tall, that was built as a monument. There were seven of them in this one temple-ground in Tibet. They were built as a monument to seven Buddhist priests who lost their lives in some rebellion and who were regarded as martyrs and so designated by living Buddhists. Little replicas were made of that bigger monument. And a little piece of clothing was placed in these little replicas. My dad got one while he was a missionary over there. When he came home in the early thirties, he gave it to a friend. A few years ago, this friend saw me and said, "I'd like to give you what I've had in my possession for thirty or forty years. Your dad brought this when he first came home from China." It reminded me of my roots in Tibet.

I had it on my desk. But here is really a piece from the occult in a strict sense. Here I am telling this young boy to clean out his closet and I've got a chorten on my desk. I can understand the difference. I'm not snared by the chorten. He's snared, though, by the occult. If I send him out saying, "Get rid of your occult." He says, "But the pastor had the chorten and he didn't get rid of his." It becomes a snare to him. I thought, "Lord, are You going to require this of me?" I picked up the chorten and threw it in the wastepaper basket. Saying, "See? This doesn't mean anything. That's what I want you to do with your stuff when you get home. Just so you won't have any doubts. When you leave, I'm not going to take it out of the basket. It's going to go to the trash and, ultimately, to the dump." He said, "You don't need to do that." I said, "Yes, I do. The world is perishing. The world is passing away. Everything is going to go sooner or later. I just sped it up a little bit. No big deal."

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It seems to me that that's the kind of point that Paul is making here. If there's any area that's troublesome in our society—the area of social drinking is one that is certainly troublesome in our society. There are Christians for whom social drinking was the beginning of the end of their Christian walk. It became a snare to them.

Teenage drinking in our country has reached epidemic levels. The average American, last year, spent a hundred and sixty-five dollars on alcoholic beverages. That means the average family of four spent over five hundred dollars. We don't have to see much evidence to see what a snare it is. Is it knowledgeable, from an intellectual viewpoint, to drink alcoholic beverages and be consistent with the Scripture? I'd have to say, on a knowledge level, "Yes, that's probably true." But the question can't be decided by knowledge. It has to be decided by other kinds of issues such as love, consideration for others and overall effects that that problem has on society. The exercise of freedom must be governed by love, not knowledge. My example may cause someone else to be defiled in their conscience (verse 8). It may cause someone else to stumble (verse 9), that is, hinder their progress. It may cause someone to be wounded (verse 12). And it may even become a snare (verse 13). That's the strongest word of all. It comes from the Greek word for scandal. But scandal doesn't quite match the original Greek word's intention. A *scandalon* was a "stick on a trap." You set a trap for a bird, and when the bird would come along and land on the stick, it would snap the trap and the bird would be caught. That's the word Paul uses here for "offend." It's a *scandalon*. It is a conduct which serves as a trap, and it ensnares someone else. It may not ensnare you, but it ensnares someone else.

To sin against my brothers is to sin against Christ—Paul realizes so well in verse 12. When you sin against your brothers in this way, that is, you use your strong knowledge to trip someone else up and they're not ready to handle the issue you're handling—when you sin against your

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brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Paul learned, at his conversion, that to sin against Christ's friends and servants was to sin against Christ. Remember what Jesus said to Paul on the road to Damascus? "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). He does not say, "Why are you persecuting Christians?" An act committed against a believer is an act committed against Christ. Therefore, the sin does not become a sin against a weaker brother, but a sin directly against Christ himself, if it ensnares and causes one to stumble and fall.

We ought to be comfortable with the fact that we have a restrictive conscience, if that is the case. There are some areas of my life where I realize my conscience is tender in a matter, and for other Christians, that wouldn't bother them at all. It doesn't really bother me that they have greater freedom than I. I won't become judgmental or prejudicial toward their freedom. But it is best for me to leave it go. I can't explain it, but it's just best for me.

On the other hand, where I have greater freedom than another believer, it may be best for them that I make a careful assessment as to whether or not it will lead them into ruin. No one has a right to practice freedom which will result in another person's ruin. How can we cause our brother for whom Christ died to fall into sin?

I'll close from a story from Dr. H. A. Ironside, one of my favorite preachers, pastor for many years of Moody Bible Church in Chicago. He relates this story of preaching in a gospel hall in the city of Detroit. A former Muslim from India was there who was the head of a tea business. He'd been brought to know the Lord. On one occasion in this church, in which Dr. Ironside was preaching, there was a Sunday School meeting, a picnic dinner. They went to a beautiful spot to spend the day together. Dr. Ironside said he was chatting with this Christian brother from India. A young girl came by, passing out sandwiches. She said, "Won't you have a sandwich?" Dr.

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Ironside said, “Thank you, what kind have you?” She said, “Several kinds.” He said, “I’ll help myself to several of them,” and he did. Then she turned to the Muslim and said, “Will you have one?” “What kind are they?” he asked. “Fresh pork, ham.” “Have you any beef or lamb or fish?” he asked. “No, I don’t have any beef or fish.” “Thank you, but I won’t have any today.”

Laughingly, she said, “Are you so under the law that you don’t eat pork? Don’t you know that a Christian is at liberty to eat any kind of meat?” “I am at liberty,” he responded, “but I am also at liberty to let it alone. I was brought up a strict Muslim. My old father, nearly eighty years of age, now is still a Muslim. Every three years, I go back to India to render an account of the business of which my father is really the head. I visit with my folks at home. When I get home, I always know how I will be greeted: My father will say to me, ‘Have those infidels taught you yet to eat that filthy meat?’ And I will say to him, ‘No, father. Pork has never passed my lips.’ Then I can have the opportunity to share Christ with him. If I took one of your sandwiches, I could not preach Christ and my father would not let me in the house the next time I went home.”

Of course, the young lady understood and we all understand that story. He is doing exactly what the apostle is suggesting here. We have liberty to refrain from doing those things if they trouble other people. Whatever the case. Love becomes the dominating motive. Wherefore, if meat makes my brother be offended, I will not eat meat while the world stands, lest I cause my brother to be ensnared.

That’s true Christian liberty, coupled with brotherly love.

Closing Prayer

Indeed, Lord, on these matters there are wide variations of opinion and practice within this congregation. The central concern, Lord, that You want for our lives, is not how much we may know about You in an intellectual sense or how much freedom we may practice in a personal

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sense. The real question is, “Do we know You? Are our hearts cleansed from sin? Or do our hearts condemn us?” You’re greater than our hearts. Are we free to live as Christians? Have we fallen into some practice which has destroyed the joy of the Lord in our lives, even though the practice, on its face practice, is legitimate and can be intellectually defended? Has it brought us into bondage or has it ensnared someone else? Or, on the other hand, have we so trusted in our abstinence from some practice that we have begun to equate Christianity with that particular abstinence? Therefore, seen a lot of the work that You want to do in our life not get done because we’ve been wearing a merit badge about some particular thing that we’re true to. Give us wisdom, Lord. Give us humility in these matters. Give us genuine love for You and for our brethren, so that we can be judgmental of ourselves without being critical of others. That we can know, too, Your great grace that was given for us. How much You love us. How You don’t want us to be separated from You. Either by direct violation of Your law or by violation of our conscience. Lord, we take You into our lives today anew. We eat, once more, from You. Help—especially our younger Christians in this auditorium who are at this point in life determining life values—to really know where they should stand and to stand with conviction. To not just go along with the crowd because everybody else is doing something and it’s needful that they participate. But to realize that there’s a real call to purity and freedom. Those two things You’re calling us to—hand in hand. And that we don’t need to refrain from everything nor do we need to participate in everything in order to really be free on the inside. You alone bring that freedom in our life and our hearts. Help us, as older people in the congregation, to live before You in prayer and love our younger friends; that in word and in deed we might be an example to others and that together, love might build us up. Knowledge will only destroy us. Theological arguments on these issues will only tear us asunder. Knowledge on these theological issues will

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tear us asunder. But practical, expressive love will cause us to grow together in Your image and Your likeness. We thank You for the liberty. We thank You for the constraints that Your Word brings to us. Through Christ, the Lord, we pray. Amen.