

The Limits of Our Liberty, Part 2

John MacArthur | 1 Corinthians 8:4–13 | January 25, 1976

One of the things that our Lord does is teach us, and he teaches us through his apostles. And we're studying one of the letters that the Lord himself wrote through the apostle Paul; the letter is 1 Corinthians. And I'd like you to take your Bible now in hand and open it up and look at 1 Corinthians chapter 8. This wonderful letter written to the church at Corinth to correct many of their problems is really the Word of our Lord Jesus Christ to us, to his church. We're in the eighth chapter and some folks have felt that maybe the eighth chapter wasn't really that relevant to us because of the uniqueness of the problem discussed. But if you were here last week, you recall that we introduced the thought that it is indeed relevant, if not in specific the general principle that comes out of it is tremendously important.

I suppose not many of us, if in fact any of us, is bothered by whether we eat ham or not, but that was a big problem in the church at Rome as indicated in Romans 14 and 15. And I doubt really whether any of us is too concerned about eating meat that has been offered to an idol; that doesn't really seem a problem in our society. I'm not too sure we'd care if it were, and since it isn't, it's not even relevant to us. But that was a major problem in the church at Corinth. **Almost all of the meat that was purchased and provided for people to eat had been offered to a god in one way or another.** Some of it had been offered as a sacrifice, three parts: One would be burned to the god, one given to the priest, the third part taken home and eaten. **And if you happened to be at someone's house, you might be eating meat offered to an idol.** The priest would take his third, go out the back of the temple and put it in a butcher shop. **You might be buying meat offered to an idol.** And they also believed that demons liked to get into people by getting on their food and going in that way as we said last time. And so everybody would dedicate the meat that they would butcher to a god so that no demon would get on it, and that would prevent that. So almost every bit of meat that the Corinthians would buy would be in some way or at some time dedicated to an idol, and so this became a problem.

Having been saved out of paganism, having been saved out of idolatry, the new Christians wanted to avoid any contact with that old kind of life. They felt much too strongly tempted toward it and they wanted to run from it. It's like an

alcoholic who comes to Christ and the best way for him to deal with drink is to stay as far away as he can. Or like somebody who is a criminal who becomes a Christian staying as far away from old patterns and old friends and so forth as he can. His new life is so new that he must withdraw himself and turn away from that and have nothing to do with it.

Well, the Christians in Corinth were so strongly integrated into the idol worship of the age that when they became believers the tendency was to want to run from everything that related to that and consequently to stay away from any meat that under any condition had ever been offered to a god. Now that raises the question the Corinthians posed to Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 8. And it introduces to us the whole subject of matters that are in that gray area. **The Bible did not forbid them to eat meat offered to an idol, and it didn't tell them to do it.** So, it was in that middle area where they had to make a decision about whether it was right or wrong. Now we call this the gray area and there are decisions in all of our lives that fall into that category. Some have chosen to call it the area of doubtful things; that is we don't know. We have doubts about whether it's right or wrong, and it may vary from time to time, age to age, culture to culture, people to people, state to state even. For example, as a boy I remember the Baptist church that I attended took a stand against smoking, and that was a big issue. And they were always telling the young people not to smoke, that it was a sin to smoke and you shouldn't smoke and they had all kinds of reasons for that. And I can remember often we would have young peoples' gatherings and they would tell us this. And we would go to the beach, for example, and we'd have a beach party and everybody would be playing around on the beach all day. Then we'd be swimming having a great time. Then at night we'd sit down around the campfire and somebody would give a speech on we shouldn't smoke. And they'd point around and see those people who are smoking and this is not what God and so forth and so on. And that was a very important thing in my young years to kind of respond to that.

Then for a while I lived in the south, and in the south I found that many churches where I visited and some where I would speak when I was just starting to preach as a very young man had as the chief source of industry among all of the people of the congregation tobacco. Everybody raised tobacco. And the preacher very frequently in the parsonage had a tobacco patch in his backyard. And I would go to that church. The preacher would come to the church, flip his cigarette in the

bush and go in and preach against mixed bathing. Now you see they believed it was a sin to run around the beach boys and girls with bathing suits on. And I agree in some cases today with the kind of bathing suits that it would be in many cases. You know something I threw on looks like you almost missed kind of you know.

The facts are that from state to state, from time to time, culture to culture you have very different standards about what is right and wrong. Now the Bible says nothing about whether or not boys and girls could swim together. It says nothing about smoking other than Rachel lit off a camel, and that has nothing to do with smoking. But the Bible – you hadn't heard that? Oh, well you can use that now. The Bible says nothing about either one of those things. So, in any given society, in any given culture, in any given period of time and under any given set of circumstances, that's a decision every Christian has to make for himself. And there are factors that contribute to that decision as have been mentioned to you in the past last week when we shared some of the guidelines for making those kinds of decisions.

Now these gray-area things can be social issues. They can be amusements. They can be pleasures. They can be habits. They can be many, many different things that we don't need to go into because you'll find out what they are when you face them, and you can't find Scripture to go either way and you're trying to make a decision. Now how does a Christian decide to do something or not to do something that he doesn't feel is wrong because he's looked over the Bible and definitely it's not forbidden, and he doesn't know if it's right because he's looked over the Bible and it doesn't say it's righteous act to do it. So, it fits a gray area; it's a doubtful thing. How does he decide? **Well, there are two extremes. The one extreme is to just make a list of rules.** And you know there are some people who really love that, they feel much more comfortable in the kind of institutional Christianity where somebody puts a big list of rules and all they have to do is conform to the rules. They've never internalized their Christian life anyway. They believe everything. They've never known how it is to really walk in the Spirit, to really grow in the Spirit, to really live a Spirit-controlled life. They're living in legalism and they want somebody to say do this, don't do this, do this, don't do this, and they can conform to that little set of rules and convince themselves that that's the equivalent of spirituality. That happens frequently. There are churches like that where there aren't any principles about how to live the Christian life; there are just lists of what you can't do. And there are some people who conform

to that mentality because it's so easy and it's such an upfront, overt statement of your spirituality to be a not-doing-this person. **Now that's legalism.**

One Christian became weary of the struggle and I read this week a statement that said this: "A group of church leaders should form a list of sinful activities so the average Christian could know at a glance what is sin and what is not and we could just follow the list." Now there are some problems with that. Number one, you could never get the church leaders to agree on what the list should include. And number two, it would set up a horrible standard of spirituality. The spiritual ones would be the ones who did what the list said, no matter what other circumstances there were involved. And legalism would become the spiritual standard, wouldn't it? **And when that happens then you stifle liberty. You take over the work of the Holy Spirit. You ignore the conscience of a believer, and you set a false standard for spirituality and produce hypocrisy. That's not going to work.** And yet there are Christians who live that way. They feel that their spirituality is based upon those areas that they do or do not do, and they believe that if they ever went to a movie all they would do would be to get in the theater and sit down and the rapture would occur and they'd have to face the Lord because they were taken at the theater. They would never dance or play cards or some Christians would never want to sip a cup of wine or whatever it might be because that would be unspiritual, and that's an absolute with them.

Some of them are incredible, some of the absolutes. It's been said by some that if they were on the desert and couldn't get anything to drink and they were dying and someone offered them an alcoholic beverage they would refuse it because God would be displeased. Now, friends, that's a little much. And I'm not sure if they were on that desert and that did happen that they would refuse it. You know you can't judge spirituality by what people don't do. Dr. Homer Hammendorf used to say, "There is a city that has two million inhabitants. None of them smoke. None of them drink. Not one of them attends movies. None of them ever dances. None of them plays cards. Not one of them however has a bit of spiritual life." The city he was speaking of was the Greenwood Hill Cemetery in New York. Now you see what they don't do has absolutely no relationship to anything. **Refraining from doing things is not spirituality. Walking in the Spirit is spirituality.** That's the positive. So we don't want to just set up legalism. People ask me, say, "Why doesn't Grace Church have a list of things?" Why should we play the Holy Spirit? Why should we not let you internalize the Christian life and walk with the Spirit as

the Spirit of God directs you? I mean there was nothing Satan would love better than to hear us pray like this, remember the Pharisee, “Lord, I thank thee that I am not like other men who smoke, drink, play cards, etcetera, etcetera, like that poor sinner over there who drinks wine.” You see that kind of mentality is hypocrisy. That’s Phariseeism because that is not the standard. There are plenty of people who don’t do those things but they’re not spiritual, they’re dead. That’s not the issue.

Now on the other hand, you have what I call libertarianism. That’s the other gamut. Now you can come to the gray area and you can say, “Well here’s all this stuff that I couldn’t do or do, and since I’m free in Christ, I’ll just do it all. It isn’t forbidden anyway, right? So I’ll just do every bit of it. And I’m not going to worry about it. I mean **I’m free in Christ. Everything’s permitted; there are no other considerations than my liberty.**” Is that the only consideration? Well not according to 1 Corinthians 8. That’s where we come. Paul says **there is one great principle that limits our liberty, and it is the word love.** You can’t just say, “Because it isn’t forbidden, I can do it.” There’s a higher consideration than that, and that is love. Love sets limits on liberty. And this is the objective of 1 Corinthians chapter 8.

Now let me give you the problem. Here was the potential in the city of Corinth to eat things offered to idols. The strong Christians, the mature Christians, the ones feeling their spiritual oats were saying, “What’s the diff? We’re eating.” They were writing Paul and saying, “Hey, Paul, what about things offered to idols? We’ve decided that we can just eat up. We’re free in Christ. Live it up, eat whatever you want. That’s our philosophy.” And so, Paul responds to that by saying, **“There is something more important than your liberty, and that is love.”**

Now the Corinthians gave Paul three reasons, and they’re on your outline there so you can follow along. Three reasons the Corinthians said why they felt they could do anything they wanted in the gray area, why they could eat meat offered to idols. Reason number one, we have all knowledge. And we’ve studied the problem and the Bible doesn’t forbid it; our knowledge tells us it’s okay. Two, an idol isn’t anything anyway. An idol is nothing, verse 4 says. So it isn’t offered to anything anyway. Third, God doesn’t care what we eat, verse 8. So on those three bases, we have knowledge and it isn’t forbidden, according to our knowledge of the Scripture. An idol isn’t anything anyway so what’s the difference, and God could

care less about what we eat. So, because we've come to those three reasonings, we have decided to go ahead and live it up and we're just eating away.

Now Paul is going to approach all three of those. Now we went into the last one last time. The first one is we know we all have knowledge. Look at verse 1-3 and I'll just read it to you. "As touching things offered to idols or meat sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. I agree with you. We study the Scripture and it doesn't forbid it. We know that it is not forbidden. But remember this, knowledge alone does what? Puffs up, and love, what, builds up." So, he says it isn't enough to just say you know. There's got to be more. There's got to be love. If you think you know anything, in verse 2, you really don't know what you ought to know, and what you ought to know is all about love, which he illustrates in verse 3. You have to go beyond knowledge to love. It isn't enough to say, "We've studied the problem, folks, and we know what the Scripture says and it doesn't say anything against it, so let's eat." Hey, you haven't thought about love. You may know something isn't evil. You may know that, in itself, it isn't evil. You may know that it is not something forbidden by God, but knowledge is not enough. You've got to love. You say, "Well what do you mean by that?" You've got to consider somebody else, how it's going to affect them. Is this a loving act toward another brother? What if it offends him? What if it hurts his conscience? Then you have to limit your liberty.

Paul said, remember in 1 Corinthians 13, "I have all knowledge and know all mysteries and have not love, I am," – what? – "nothing. I'm nothing." I can't live on knowledge alone. I can't say, "Hey, what do I care what anybody thinks? What do I care about you? What do I care how it affects you? I have liberty, and I studied my Bible and it doesn't forbid it, I'm going to live it up." "Wait a minute, you haven't thought about love," Paul says. "If you do that, don't you realize that'll hurt your brother, 'cause he'll be offended."

Now let's develop that as we look at the second reason in verse 4 and pick it up where we left off. Verse 4, here's their second reason. "We know that an idol is nothing." And this is solid. Man, this is the best theology in the passage; it's just really beautiful. Look what he says. "Now 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 no other God but one." He says, "Look, I agree with you. In regard to this eating thing, we know this, that an idol is nothing

in the world.” Literally it says, “There is no such thing as an idol in the world. There is no such thing in the whole world as an idol.” In other words, nobody’s home. **Those gods aren’t gods at all**; there’s nobody there. Now this is great theology.

I remember when I was in Hawaii, I was working on the Galatians commentary this week and reading that illustration I used when I taught Galatians. And I went in that Buddhist temple and there was that little lady bowing down to this brass Buddha, great big fat ugly Buddha, and she was bowing down and throwing little rocks. She had like dice and rolling out little rocks. And then they would fall a certain way, and I suppose it was sort of an answer from the god how the rocks configure. But rolling out the rocks you know. And I watched and I watched, and she would bow you know and all. And I kept saying to myself, “That lady, nobody’s home. There is nobody there.” You know you want to go up and knock on his stomach and say, “See, nobody there. Nobody home.” Here is this little lady bowing down to nothing, rolling out her little rocks to nothing. And there was all kinds of food at his feet. All kinds of people had brought food and they kept putting it there. There wasn’t anybody there, nothing. And that’s precisely the argument of verse 4, “Why not eat? There’s nobody there anyway. The stuff that they bring in and offer to an idol the idol can’t respond because there is no god there, none at all.” Oh, they think there are many gods. Verse 5, “There be that are called gods. They call them gods whether in heaven or in earth as there are gods, many and lords many.” According to them, they’re all over the place. “But to us,” verse 6, “there is but,” – what? – “one God.” What’s the difference? Boy, that’s good theology. Man, that’s good theology. You know Paul had preached this; he had to agree with them. Acts 19:26, I’ll just read it. He says – this is of course in Ephesus when the riot broke out because of what happened in burning all of their gods and everything. Verse 26, “Moreover you see and hear that not alone in Ephesus but almost throughout all Asia this Paul hath persuaded and turned away many people saying that they are no gods which are made with hands.” In other words, there’s nothing there. They are no gods, that’s Paul’s message. There’s a great statement on that in Psalm 115 that all of us should really know well. It’s from verses – well we’ll start in verse 3. “Our God is in the heavens.” Now listen, their idols are silver and gold, the work of men’s hands. Now listen to this tremendous description of an idol. “They have mouths but they speak not. Eyes have they but they see not. They have ears but they hear not. Noses have they but they smell not. They have hands but they handle not. Feet

have they but they walk not. Neither speak they through their throat. They who make them are like unto them.” That’s a little bit sarcastic there. The people who make them are as dumb as the gods are. So is everyone who trusts in them. You know they’re building one of those Buddhist things right down here and they’re all down there running around bowing down to nobody. Nobody’s home. The world thinks there are many gods. Verse 5, the Romans had so many gods they said that it was easier to find a god in Athens than it was a man.

Isaiah 44, of course from Isaiah 40 on you have so many great statements of the character of God. In Isaiah 44:8, it says, “Fear not, neither be afraid, have not I told you and declared you are even my witnesses. Is there a god beside me? Yay, there is no god. I know not any. They that make a carved image are all of them vanity and their delectable things shall not profit, and they are their own witnesses. They see not nor know that they may be ashamed. Who hath formed the god or melded and cast an image that is profitable for nothing?” There’s nobody there. Jeremiah 10:14 says the same thing. Over in the little book of Habakkuk an interesting statement in 2:19: “Woe to him that says to the wood, ‘Awake,’ to the dumb stone, ‘Arise. It shall teach.’ Behold it is laid over with gold and silver and there is no breath at all within it.” I love this next one: “But the Lord is in his holy temple and all the earth keeps silence before him.” There’s a big difference, nobody’s home. False gods, nobody there, no reality.

Now the argument then is what’s the difference if we eat meat offered to idols when there’s nobody there? There is nobody there anyway. And that’s a pretty good argument; I like it, solid theology. They’re really reiterating the shema of Israel, “The Lord our God is,” – what? – “one Lord.” Great statement. Why hassle? **Now later we’re going to find out as we get into chapter ten that demons would impersonate the gods that they thought were there and then convince them that there was a supernatural entity there.** But the gods they thought were there weren’t there; there were no true gods there. They believe that when you worship the god, when you made a sacrifice, you commune by the smoke that went off the sacrifice; you were communing with that god. And the Corinthians said, “But there are no gods, so what’s the difference?” And they were dead right; they were absolutely right. Their knowledge can’t be argued. They just think there are many gods.

Verse 6, this great, great statement: “But to us or for us,” the pagan religion is in verse 5, the Christian in verse 6, “But for us there is but one God,” and who is he? He is the father. “The father from whom all things exist and we in him. And,” – this is beautiful, look at it – “one Lord.” Who is he? Jesus Christ. “Through whom all things exist and we by him.” Now he’s simply reiterating the great statement of the foundation of the Christian faith, one God, one God the father. “From whom are all things and for whom we exist,” literally. “From whom,” – now watch it. Here’s God the father from whom, “everything comes to us and for whom we exist.” God comes to us and we come back to his presence glorifying him. Now the agency, one Lord, who is it? Jesus Christ. “Through whom all things exist and through whom we exist.” Now what is he saying? He’s simply saying God the source coming to us, we going back to him, Christ the agency. God came to us in Christ; we go back to God through Christ. The through is the key in defining Christ. God the ultimate and only source and Christ the agent. So this is a great statement. We could spend a tremendous amount of time on it but we won’t for the sake of getting the argument of the passage. **He’s simply saying here, “I agree with you that there’s nobody there anyway. There’s only one God, and that settles it. And if that’s the case, man, we really might as well eat up.”** That’s a great argument, really a potent argument. I mean how can you argue with it? Offering something to an idol is absolutely nothing, doesn’t mean anything.

But Paul isn’t finished. Look at verse 7. Now here is his response to their reasoning: “However,” – with as good an argument as that is, listen – “However, there is not in every man that knowledge.” Now stop there for a second. **Everybody doesn’t yet have that knowledge. What knowledge? That idols are nothing. Now they may have it in their heads. They have been taught the same basic truth, but they don’t have an inner understanding of it. Put it this way, that knowledge has not yet been emotionally integrated into the pattern of their living. You know you can know something in your head that doesn’t really get to you yet and make a difference in your life.**

Let’s say you got a guy here and he’s 35 years old. We’ll take an age that’s right in the prime of life, or 36, somewhere around there. And here is this guy and he’s been living 35 years in a pagan situation. Every day of his conscious life since he first could apprehend and comprehend everything, he knew there were gods. There was mother and dad and there were the people around him, and there were gods, gods everywhere; up and down the streets, all over the temples

proliferating everywhere. All over the house. They had them over the portals of the doors. They had them in the rooms of the house. They had them in the columns of the street. You can see some of the ruins in parts of the Roman world walking down some of those old Roman streets they're just strewn with statues of gods everywhere.

So here is this guy all his life that's all he's known. He's bowed down. He's seen people give testimonials to the gods. He's seen catastrophes come and people attribute them to the gods. He's seen horrible, filthy pagan orgies going on in the name of the gods. This whole kind of life. All of a sudden, he becomes a Christian, and then he's saved out of this. And his commitment to Christ is so whole and so beautiful and so fresh and so wonderful and so different that he says, "Man, I don't want anything to do with that vile, evil life with those false gods." Somebody says, "But there are no real gods there." Well, he may hear that in his mind but he'll never be able to say without some time to mature and understand it, "Oh yeah, that's right they aren't there at all, are they?" No, too much involvement. Too long has he been intimate with them. Too long has he moved in and among that whole false system. To emotionally have integrated into his attitude that there are no other gods, that's going to take time. And that's precisely what Paul is saying. "Yeah, it's fine to say an idol is nothing, but not everybody understands that really. Not everybody can feel that. And you can run out and eat up all you want, but that guy is going to go, take one bite, and he's going to say, 'Ooh, this is being offered to Bacchas, that vile, rotten, despicable god.' And he's going to feel guilty and sinful and it's going to destroy his personality. It's going to destroy his fellowship with God. Don't do it." That's the point.

Now the conscience of some has not yet grown up to understand the liberty. They are weak. They're immature. They're over-scrupulous. They're somewhat legalistic. They are not free to grasp their liberties, and so you don't do it. Now the weaker brother knows there's only one true God; he knows it in his head. But he's not able to let go of a lifetime of belief. He's not able to just say, "They're not real," and really, really mean and believe it, because it's just too quick, too sudden. He has to grow into that comprehension. And so look at verse 7: "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." Now notice the phrase "conscience of the idol." The word conscience is not the best translation. It should be translated one of two ways, maybe both of them together. It means intimacy and it means being

accustomed to. Let me put it together and read it this way: “For some who are accustomed to being intimate with an idol,” you see? Some people are so accustomed to this intimate life of devotion to idols, long accustomed to this, and notice in verse 7: “Unto this hour.” And here is the idea that they’re just new, that it’s just right ‘til now that they’ve been hung on this. Maybe they’ve been saved a little while but even until then they’re still holding some of those old associations and thoughts even though they’re Christians. They can’t shake the feeling that an idol is something real and it would be wrong to do anything at all connected with idol worship.

Now watch: “With this feeling, if they go ahead and,” verse 7, “eat it as a thing offered to an idol, their conscience, because it is still so weak, will be,” – what? – “defiled.” **Now the man who eats is going to defile his conscience if he believes it’s wrong. You know what I mean by that? His conscience tells you, “Don’t do that.” That little voice in there, “Don’t do that. That’s a part of paganism. You can’t touch that. That’s a part of that stuff offered to that false god.” His conscience tells him not to do it, but he sees everybody do it so he goes and does it. You know what happens? Immediately his conscience is defiled.** What does that mean? His conscience begins to beat on him. His conscience begins to make him feel sinful. It begins to make him feel guilty. It begins to make him feel condemned. It begins to make him feel God has failed him. It makes him have hatred and resentment toward the Christian brother who set the pattern that he followed. It creates division in the body. It pushes him deeper into legalism, deeper into weakness, deeper into sorrow, and it may tempt him because if he can’t handle even in the meat maybe when he begins to indulge in that he’ll get caught up with the whole orgie that goes with the eating of the meat and he’s in a terrible situation of falling into sin just because he violated that conscience that wasn’t yet liberated. “You’re better off,” says Paul, “to let that guy live by his conscience even if it’s confining.” Better for him to avoid it until his conscience is liberated.

Now Romans says the same thing and it’s very explicit. Romans 14:23, listen: “He that doubts is condemned if he eats because he doesn’t eat believing.” He condemns himself. The doubter goes ahead and does it and he heaps guilt and condemnation and sorrow and bitterness and resentment and antagonism toward those who set the example for him. **“So if it’s going to be a problem for you,” he says, “don’t do it. And if it’s a problem for somebody around you, don’t you do it because you’ll set a pattern that if he follows will wind up be defiling to himself.”**

Now let me explain it if I can another way that may help. Knowledge says, “You can eat.” Love says, “Think about how it affects somebody else, and then decide.” Knowledge says, “An idol is nothing, let’s eat.” Love says, “Wait. I choose not to eat, though I may, because my brother believes it’s wrong and I’ll bow to his belief until he matures to understand.”

Now the third reason – we’ll open it up and fill out the whole case. Watch, verses 8-12. Thirdly their argument is this, we know that food is no issue with God. Verse 8, and this will expand on this whole concept again; you’ll see it. Now here’s their third argument. “Now we’re eating because food commends us not to God.” The word commend, *paristēmi* means to draw near to. **Food doesn’t bring us nearer to God. God could care less what you eat. Now that doesn’t mean – God does care if you’re gluttonous, and God cares if you’re over-indulgent and God cares if you are wasteful and all that. But God doesn’t care if you have broccoli, cauliflower, hotdogs, hamburgers, pizza or whatever. God doesn’t care. There aren’t any religious rules. All the spiritual people aren’t vegetarians, that’s the idea. It doesn’t matter to God what you eat in terms of you know whether you like gravy or not, you know that isn’t the issue.**

There are no dietary laws within Christianity. Other than using your head, you don’t want to eat something that’s going to hurt you and you don’t want to overindulge yourself and you don’t want to live to eat. But God doesn’t care what the food might be. Those laws have all been set aside, right? Acts 10, Peter saw the vision. God says, “Rise, Peter, kill and eat, no more dietary laws.” Jesus said it in Mark 7 when he said, “It’s not what goes into a man that defiles him. It’s what comes out of a man.” Paul told him in 1 Timothy 4, “Everything is to be received with,” – what? – “thanksgiving.” Eat it all; God's provided all of it. And so the dietary laws are set aside, so they’re just reiterating what Paul has said many times, “It doesn’t matter what we eat.” Verse 8: “Neither if we eat are we any better. Neither if we eat not are we any worse. **There is no spiritual consequence to eating or not eating.” God doesn’t care. It brings us no advantage either way.**

So why not eat? I mean if it’s there and it’s tasty and it’s wonderful, what’s the difference? **God doesn’t care what we eat. Well God doesn’t specifically, but God does care about his other children, and they care what we eat.** Verse 9: “Take heed, lest by any means or in any way this liberty that you have might become a,” – what? – “stumbling block to them that are weak.” **A stumbling block is an**

occasion to fall into sin, something that makes somebody fall into sin. You're going to make a brother fall into sin. You're going to set an example, he'll follow it, it'll go against his conscience, he'll feel guilty, he'll feel bitter, it'll push him deeper into legalism and so forth and so forth. And it'll get him in a situation that he can't handle. Maybe he shouldn't be in that idol temple and maybe God doesn't want him there because he's not as strong as you. You can go there and just eat the meat. If he goes there, he's going to get caught up in the orgie along with the eating. And that's the reason God has given him a closed conscience to keep him out of the area he's not ready to go into yet. So don't force on him what God is not forcing on him by his conscience. And believe me, the Holy Spirit's in control of conscience, right? So, if the Holy Spirit chooses to live in a man's conscience, don't you think you're superior to the Holy Spirit and force him to do something that his conscience doesn't let him do when the Spirit's in control of his conscience. Don't force people to do things they feel are wrong.

Now some of you folks, you may be married and you may believe something's right and your wife doesn't believe it's right. And if you force her to do that thing, you are violating the work of the Holy Spirit through her conscience. There's a reason God has made her that way, and vice versa. Now in verse 10 he explains how this can happen. "For if any man sees you who have knowledge." You're the one with all the knowledge, you're the Bible scholar. And here you are literally reclining at the table in the idol's temple. You're just flaked out there leisurely enjoying your meat. You're having a feast. Maybe your sister's getting married and you're at the wedding and they had the wedding in the temple. It's a pagan temple, a pagan ceremony. You're a Christian but you felt you should be there with your family, and you're just reclining eating away. And here comes your weak brother, a brand-new Christian, saved out of paganism, hates everything about it. He sees you and he says to himself – look, the conscience of him who is weak will be emboldened. In other words, all of a sudden his conscience is going to get real bold. "Hey, look over there, there's Mac and he's eating, see? Look, he's lying on there, oh he's stuffing it in. Oh, that looks good. He can do it. This is a nice occasion, I can do it." And he goes against his conscience.

What happens? He is emboldened to eat the things offered to idols, verse 10. Now watch 11: "And through your knowledge shall the weak brother perish for whom Christ died?" The word perish doesn't mean die and go to hell, incidentally. It translates ruin; **you're going to ruin him**. And ruin isn't even a good English word

because it has such a finality to it. **But at this point in time, you're going to bring him down. You're going to crush him. You're going to smash him down. You're going to force him into sin.** Here he comes. He says, "Hey, he's doing it." And he does it and he doesn't get that meat in his mouth and swallowed down until he begins to feel guilty. "Hey, what am I doing at this orgie? I just got saved out of this. I can't take it. This is tempting." And all of a sudden guilt, and he begins to resent you for setting the pattern. And he can't resist the full temptation of the pagan thing that he's seeing around him, and he falls further away from his liberty. And you haven't helped him at all. You've just pushed him into sin, and he begins to resent God. "Why'd you allow this to happen to me?" And all these things that come out of the fact that he's violating conscience.

Now I'm going to give you something that's very critical, and I want you to listen to this because it's a principle. Don't ever violate your conscience. Whatever that voice is saying in you listen to that. It is never a good habit to start violating conscience. It's not smart to say to a weaker brother, "I know it bothers you but take my word, keep doing it, keep doing it and you'll feel better about it." He'll feel worse about it. You'll teach him to violate his conscience, and God will lose one very important way to guide a man. Don't ever start out violating conscience. Teach people to obey conscience because that's the voice of the Spirit of God leading them into areas that he feels he can handle.

Now listen, **conscience is God's doorkeeper to keep us out of the areas we don't belong in yet. As we mature, conscience gradually opens more and more doors and we can go in without stumbling, without falling, without being defiled.** It's like a little baby comes into your house and first of all you become the conscience of the baby and you say, "This is how much room you've got, kid. You can't go out of it." The kid can walk through the house, just can't touch anything. That might break. Don't pick that up, put that down, get away from there, don't touch that, it's hot, it'll break, that's new, leave it alone, you know all of that. Drop the Crayola, that's the thing you got to watch in our house. Walls, Crayola's and stuff. You give little limits and as the child gets older, you expand the limits. You can touch that because you won't break it. I think she's all right; can she hold the milk without spilling it? I think she's at the age. Plop, she's not at the age. And on and on you go, see. You begin to expand. You begin to expand the liberty. You become the conscience and you determine what can be handled and what can't. You expand it; you expand it. Finally, at 18 years old you throw the kid out of the

house and say, “Here you are, there’s the world, now you ought to know what to do with it.”

And the same thing is true spiritually. **God takes a spiritual baby and confines that baby by conscience. And little by little as maturity comes, God begins to expand what conscience will allow as instruction and growth takes place. If you run ahead of God and force things, you’re only going to make the person more legalistic.** You’re going to crush the person, and you’re going to push them backwards. Don’t force people against conscience. In fact, brother and sister, if you’re mature, limit your conscience for their sake. Have you ever thought of this? You know **there are some things as parents that we wouldn’t do because we wouldn’t offend our children, that we might have the liberty to do but wouldn’t do because they wouldn’t have the liberty to understand us doing them. Now that’s true in all dimensions of the Christian community.**

You say, “Man, I’m supposed to govern my life about how it affects somebody else?” Yeah. You say, “Why?” I’ll tell you why, verse 11. What a zapper this is. “Through your knowledge shall the weaker brother be ruined,” – listen – “for whom” – what? – “Christ died.” How would you treat somebody? How would you treat somebody that Jesus died to save? How should you treat them? Oh, it’s an interesting thought. Always remember the story my dad used to tell about a guy who fell off a seven-story building and a man caught him, saved his life. And it killed the man who caught him, just telescoped his body. And the father of the man who caught the falling man spent the rest of his life giving money and everything that the man that he caught needed. And he said the reason he did it was simply because if that man meant enough for his son to give his life to save him, then he felt he ought to honor his son’s love by giving that man everything that he could. Now that’s the mentality that we have to have toward a Christian. Listen, you may not agree with his view of life. You may not agree with what he does or doesn’t do, but he is one for whom Christ paid a penalty on the cross, for whom he shed his blood, and you ought to treat him as such. There is a beautiful dignity, beloved, in every Christian. And I am thrilled, I am thrilled to limit my liberty by love for the brother. If Jesus loved him, I want to love him, right? If Jesus gave his life for him and died for him, at least I could live conscious of him.

Take it a step further in verse 12. This will knock you right out. **“When you sin so against the brother, when you disregard him and just go ahead and do what you**

want, just anything that's on your mind and you would his conscience, you sin," – what? – "against Christ." What a statement. Why? Because that believer is one with Jesus Christ. And when you do something to ruin him, you have sinned against Christ. Jesus said, "Listen, it's better for somebody to hang a millstone around his neck and be drowned in the sea than it is to harm or offend one of these little ones that belong to me." In Matthew chapter 25, Jesus said this: "In as much as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have," – what? – "done it unto me." Be careful, beloved, not to beat up your brother. That's what the word there means, *tuptō*, wound, not to strike him, because in so doing you sin against Christ. "Beloved, let us love one another," – how? – "by limiting our liberty for the sake of each other."

Having all that said, Paul concludes, here's the principle. Are you ready for this? Here is the principle to govern the area of gray, the doubtful thing. "Wherefore if food makes my brother to offend, I will," – what? – "eat no meat as long as the world stands, lest I make my brother offend." What's the principle, beloved, in deciding whether to do something or not do it? The principle is love, how will it affect my weaker brother. Not, "Well I don't care. He's weak. He doesn't understand. He's got his own problems." No, no. Christ died for him. You sin against him, you sin against Christ. Would to God we had that kind of love in the church so that we weren't scandalizing our weaker brothers but rather holding them up and building them up. No Christian has the right to indulge in anything that offends another Christian, for that's an offense against Christ.

Father, thank you again this morning for a clear Word. We cannot misunderstand it. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.