

The Imperfect Church - 15
The Free Church
1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Introduction

In a blog post titled "*So I Quit Drinking*," Christian writer Sarah Bessey gives a powerful example of habits that, perhaps not sinful in themselves, can become sinful to us. She begins by admitting that she had been a lover and consumer of wine throughout adulthood, and it "never bothered [her] in the least."

Bessey continues: "I have learned that when you are walking with Jesus, the Holy Spirit is always up to something. And when it comes to conviction, I have found the Spirit to be gentle but relentless. Change and transformation is an ongoing process ... We begin to sense that this Thing that used to be okay is no longer okay. The Thing that used to mean freedom has become bondage..."

She writes that a year prior, she knew God wanted her to stop drinking. ... Oh, I had all of the excuses for why I could keep enjoying my wine in the evenings—*I work hard, I give so much, I'm not an alcoholic, I'm never hung-over, it doesn't affect my life, it's social, it's fun, it's in the Bible for pity's sake!* I began to be haunted by the writer of Hebrews who said, " ... let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us." I began to wonder why I was resisting throwing off the "weight" of alcohol, why I was so determined to keep running my race with this habit that had begun to feel so heavy. In my soul, I could see the Holy Spirit practically jogging alongside of me to say every now and again: "Aren't you ready to put that heavy weight down yet? I think it's time you stopped this one. ... It looks to me like it's getting heavier the longer you hold on."

After mentioning the dangers of becoming legalistic, Bessey concludes, "But in our steering away from legalism, I wonder if we left the road to holiness or began to forget that God also cares about what we do and how we do it and why. Conviction is less about condemnation than it is about invitation. It's an invitation into freedom. It's an invitation into wholeness."¹

¹<https://www.preachingtoday.com/search/?menu%5Bcontenttypedisplayname%5D=Illustration&query=freedom>, accessed 6/12/2019.

What does it mean to be “free in Christ?” Of course, once we place our trust in Jesus, we are free from the power and consequences of our sin. We are forgiven and given the hope of eternal life. But that’s not the kind of freedom Sarah Bessey was talking about. That’s not the kind of freedom we are talking about today. In Christ, we are freed from the law, the Bible says. We are freed from finding our security in our obedience to the OT law. Our security is found in the love of God, shown to us in Jesus, in his sinless life and sacrificial death. That’s what saves us, not our own righteousness. 2 Corinthians 3:17 says “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” Galatians 5:1 says it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. But what does that mean in everyday life?

Every single day of your life you are forced to make hundreds of decisions. As Christians, we care if those decisions honor God or not. We want to faithfully follow Jesus. We do that by making godly decisions about what we do, what we don’t do, what we say, what we don’t say, where we go, where we don’t go. We naturally gravitate to one of two extremes, ones we have talked about before. One extreme is legalism where we go a more restrictive route with our decisions. Life becomes all about what we cannot do. The other extreme is licentiousness where we move away from any form of restriction with our decisions. After all, we are free in Christ, we can do what we want.

In the Bible there are clear black and white moral issues, where God has already made the decision for us. It is always wrong to murder, to steal, to abuse, to lie. It is always right to be honest, to help, to love. When a decision we have to make has already been dealt with in black and white in the Bible, it makes our decision-making easier. It’s not even hard. We simply see how God addresses it, and as Christ-followers, we follow his lead. But what about those issues in life that aren’t black and white. They are what we would call “gray” areas. Areas that the Bible does not specifically address with book/chapter/verse.

In any given historical era, the church has to deal with these gray areas that are unique to that given time. The gray areas Christians were dealing with 100 years ago aren’t really what we are dealing with today. What we do regarding entertainment, what to watch on TV, what movies are appropriate to see, what clothes are appropriate to wear, how money is spent, the proper role of technology...all of these are gray areas we must wrestle with. Really, the culture around us dictates what these gray areas are. We are Christians who are loyal to the Lord, so how do we interact rightly with the world we live in? How do we navigate the balance of living for Christ in our culture?

Thankfully the Bible does help us here. Not by giving us specific commands about every tiny detail of how to live your life, but by giving us principles to help us live in this tension of being a Christian in a non-Christian world. As we move forward in 1 Corinthians, we now turn to a new section that deals with this in particular. For the last 3 chapters, Paul has been answering a series of questions regarding sexual ethics, marriage, remarriage, and singleness. Now he turns his attention to another one of their questions, this one regarding a gray area. Though their gray areas of life were different than ours, the principles he introduces in chapters 8-10 are as relevant for today as they were in 1st century Corinth.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 - Now regarding your question about food that has been offered to idols. Yes, we know that “we all have knowledge” about this issue. But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church. ² Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn’t really know very much. ³ But the person who loves God is the one whom God recognizes.

⁴ So, what about eating meat that has been offered to idols? Well, we all know that an idol is not really a god and that there is only one God.⁵ There may be so-called gods both in heaven and on earth, and some people actually worship many gods and many lords. ⁶ But for us,

There is one God, the Father,
by whom all things were created,
and for whom we live.

And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ,
through whom all things were created,
and through whom we live.

⁷ However, not all believers know this. Some are accustomed to thinking of idols as being real, so when they eat food that has been offered to idols, they think of it as the worship of real gods, and their weak consciences are violated. ⁸ It’s true that we can’t win God’s approval by what we eat. We don’t lose anything if we don’t eat it, and we don’t gain anything if we do.

⁹ But you must be careful so that your freedom does not cause others with a weaker conscience to stumble. ¹⁰ For if others see you—with your “superior knowledge”—eating in the temple of an idol, won’t they be encouraged to violate their conscience by eating food that has been offered to an idol? ¹¹ So because of your superior knowledge, a weak believer for whom Christ died will be destroyed. ¹² And when you sin against other believers by encouraging them to do something they believe is wrong, you are sinning against Christ. ¹³ So if what I eat causes another believer to sin, I will never eat meat again as long as I live—for I don’t want to cause another believer to stumble.

TS – though his argument regarding this issue goes on through chapter 10, and we will spend the next few weeks walking through it together, here he introduces the issue being faced and a beginning for how Christians are to handle gray areas of life.

The issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols is not something we find highly relevant in 21st century America. Though there are many countries and cultures today where Christians are still figuring out this very issue (the meat markets of India, ancestral worship in China), ours is not one of them. But this was a huge, primary issue for the 1st century church. When the church began in Acts 2 in the city of Jerusalem, it was primarily a movement among those who had previously held to Judaism. Jesus was Jewish, all of his initial apostles were Jewish, and Jesus never really left Israel during his life. But as the church explodes there in Jerusalem, the message of the Gospel begins to be taken around the world.

Reading through the book of Acts is exciting as you see how God takes the Gospel from a primarily Jewish audience to the Gentile (all non-Jews//ethnos) world. Though it was exciting, this created some problems. You see, Jews were already monotheistic (believe in the one true God of the Bible). They already had a solid faith-based morality. They just had to be convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. The pagan cultures around the Roman Empire knew no such things. They were polytheists (believing in multiple gods) and had no sense of a similar morality. Remember, this is the primary issue in Corinth...how do these new Christians, who have come out of this pagan background, faithfully follow Jesus in that pagan culture?

Idolatry reigned supreme in these ancient pagan cultures. It was literally everywhere and in every aspect of life. Social gatherings like weddings, funerals, large meals, birthdays, etc...all took place in large dining rooms at pagan temples. Unions and guilds for every kind of worker were based around different gods and work was done to honor those gods. At any meal, a blessing was asked of different gods. Everyone and everything was tainted by idolatry. Including food. When a worshiper would offer a sacrifice at the temple of an idol, it was divided into three portions: 1) the token part for the actual sacrifice, 2) part given to the temple priest for payment, 3) rest either given to the worshiper or given to markets to sell. Pretty much any meat you ate, at your own house, at another's house, or purchased at the market had been offered in dedication to a pagan god or goddess.

God has always been clear that his people are to have absolutely nothing to do with any form of idolatry. It is the 2nd of the Ten Commandments. God condemns idolatry from beginning to end in the Bible. And now there are these new Christians who have come out of that idolatrous background and need to stay far away from it now. And that includes eating meat sacrificed to them.

In Acts 15, at what we call the Jerusalem Council, the early Apostles met together to figure out what to do about these pagans who were coming to Christ, not from a Jewish background. While some were calling for these new converts to essentially become Jews first (adhere to some OT laws) before they can be saved, the council of Apostles and Elders come to a different conclusion.

Acts 15:6-11 - ⁶ So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. ⁷ At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: "Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. ⁸ God knows people's hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith. ¹⁰ So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? ¹¹ We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus."

Yes, and amen to that. We are not saved by adhering to some Jewish law, but by God's grace. The Apostle James concludes:

Acts 15:19-20 - ¹⁹ "And so my judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ Instead, we should write and tell them to abstain from eating food offered to idols, from sexual immorality, from eating the meat of strangled animals, and from consuming blood.

From the very beginning of Christianity, eating meat sacrificed to idols was something that was counseled to avoid. But over time some Christians began to view this issue as gray. It's everything in their culture, almost inescapable. These Christians in Corinth were struggling with how to live faithfully regarding this gray issue, and they didn't all agree with one another on how to go about handling it. So they ask Paul, who was at the Jerusalem Council, to help them. Let's walk through the text and then see some implications for us today. Paul offers 3 pieces of teaching that help navigate the gray:

1. THE OVERRIDING PRINCIPLE – LOVE BUILDS UP (V. 1-3)

v. 1 - Now regarding your question about food that has been offered to idols. Yes, we know that “we all have knowledge” about this issue. But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church.

When Paul says “We all have knowledge” he is quoting back to them another one of their slogans that they have obviously used in their letter to him. Those in favor of going to these pagan social gatherings and eating this idol meat are making a point...and it’s a good point...we know that idols really aren’t a thing, so this isn’t a big deal. But herein lies the problem: they had knowledge, but their argument and how they were handling the issue stopped at knowledge. They knew better, had superior knowledge, and that settles it. They are right, deal with it. But that’s not a loving, Christian attitude. Our faith is not only about truth. It is also about that truth showing itself in love. The Gospel writer John tells us that Jesus came full of “grace and truth.”

Knowledge makes us feel important (and this is the ongoing problem for the Corinthians). They want to feel important. They want to be a big deal. We have already seen it in the letter and it’s not going away anytime soon. They are too big for their britches. The phrase “makes us feel important” means “puffed up.” It’s the Greek word *physioo*, which has the sound of wind built into itself. Knowledge without love puffs up, turns someone into a windbag. Paul uses this term 7x in the New Testament. Six of them are used to describe the Corinthians. They are full of knowledge and full of themselves.

While knowledge puffs up, love builds up. Love is what strengthens the church. The word for strengthen is the word for constructing a house. Love lifts, builds, pieces together, completes. For this entire letter Paul has been trying to get the Corinthian Christians to live out the reality of being the Church. They are the “called out ones” God’s very own people. Part of what that means is a deliberate focus on, sensitivity towards, and deference towards other Christians. We are to focus less on how we are right and more on how we can help another.

Rick Warren, Pastor of Saddleback Church in Southern California and author of the Purpose-Driven Life, tells a story about early on in his marriage to Kay. He was kind of a big deal and wanted everyone to know it. But he applied that at home with her too. Whenever they’d get into some argument or disagreement in their first year or so of marriage, Rick would assert himself, apply his superior knowledge to the issue, and win every argument. It was great. He was loving

marriage. Kay, however, was not. In a very hard conversation, she helped him to understand that marriage was not about being right and winning arguments. She told him, "You are winning the arguments, but you are losing me." That's what Paul is saying here. You may have the right knowledge, but you are missing what it means to be the church. It's not about being right; it's about being loving with the truth.

v. 2-3 - ² Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn't really know very much. ³ But the person who loves God is the one whom God recognizes.

Once you think you're a know it all, all you've done is prove how little you really know. One professor summed it up rightly when he said, "To be ignorant means you are ignorant of your ignorance. To have knowledge means you know how ignorant you really are." Again, this is not about knowing the right facts, this is about love. And that begins with a love for God...and the one who loves God is the one God recognizes. Paul is doing a bit of a passive aggressive move here. The word for 'recognize' is the word for knowledge. So to these people who are concerned with knowledge over love, he tells them that the one who loves God is the one who is known by God. And that knowledge, the knowledge God has of you...that's the knowledge that matters the most.

2. THE FUNDAMENTAL TRUTH – THERE IS ONE GOD (V. 4-6)

Is it really a big deal to eat meat sacrificed to an idol? These Corinthians didn't think so. Yes, the pagan idolaters had asked a pagan deity to bless the meat, and to protect them...but...idols aren't real! These gods aren't really God. So if I asked a unicorn pixie-fairy to bless the food, who cares?! It's not real.

I have only experienced anything along these lines one time. I am a volunteer chaplain out at Sarah Bush, and I have always done that at hospitals around where I have preached. Years ago I was at a chaplain/religious event at a hospital in Belleville, just outside of St. Louis. It was a lunch to thank the chaplains for serving the hospital. And in environments like that, "Christian" becomes a pretty loose term to accommodate all the varying faith beliefs one contacts at a hospital. At this lunch one of the other chaplains prayed before we ate. She prayed to the Divine Mother who really doesn't have any truth but loves and accepts and affirms anyone and everything. She prayed to a false god that is not real. Did I eat the food? Yup.

v. 4-6 - ⁴ So, what about eating meat that has been offered to idols? Well, we all know that an idol is not really a god and that there is only one God.⁵ There may be so-called gods both in heaven and on earth, and some people actually worship many gods and many lords. ⁶ But for us, There is one God, the Father,
 by whom all things were created,
 and for whom we live.
 And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ,
 through whom all things were created,
 and through whom we live.

There is only one God and he is the only one we need to be concerned with. These other idols are not part of the equation because they are not real. So at this point, Paul is very much in line with their line of reasoning in Corinth. We all know that this stuff isn't real, so why are we spending time talking about it? We have the knowledge part down. But what about the love part?

3. THE SUPREME CONSIDERATION – THE CHRISTIAN FOR WHOM CHRIST DIED (V. 7-13)

v. 7-8 - ⁷ However, not all believers know this. Some are accustomed to thinking of idols as being real, so when they eat food that has been offered to idols, they think of it as the worship of real gods, and their weak consciences are violated. ⁸ It's true that we can't win God's approval by what we eat. We don't lose anything if we don't eat it, and we don't gain anything if we do.

So you can't say "we all" have knowledge about this. That's simply never true. Some believers are new to the faith and they don't see this issue the same way you do. What you see as gray, they see as black and white. They've just come out of pagan idolatry, being set free by Jesus from that grievous background. They've seen the light; they want nothing to do with the darkness. You think you're ok flirting with this gray area...they aren't with you on that.

When the Bible speaks of our conscience, think of it in terms of what we'd call today someone's "moral compass." When someone is new to the faith or hasn't been taught the Bible like you have, their moral compass isn't as dependable as yours is. It's not as strong.

v. 9-10 - ⁹ But you must be careful so that your freedom does not cause others with a weaker conscience to stumble. ¹⁰ For if others see you—with your "superior knowledge"—eating in the temple of an idol, won't they be

encouraged to violate their conscience by eating food that has been offered to an idol?

The concern here is that you could inadvertently use your freedom (word means 'authority') in a way that could lead another believer to follow your example. And following your example could lead them into sin. Now...here is what we are NOT talking about: we are not talking about some narrow-minded legalist disapproving of the shows you watch on TV or your choice of beverage. We are talking about the potential of an immature believer seeing the choices of a believer and being led into sin.

There is a part of us that can think about that and respond like this: "that's on them. If that happens, it's their fault. I didn't tell them or force them to do that. I'm only accountable for my own sin, not theirs." We have so individualized our faith that we are missing the point of what it means to be the Church. You can say all you want that you are not accountable for their sin...the Bible disagrees with you.

v. 11-12 - ¹¹ So because of your superior knowledge, a weak believer for whom Christ died will be destroyed. ¹² And when you sin against other believers by encouraging them to do something they believe is wrong, you are sinning against Christ.

If your actions of not separating from the culture cause someone else to sin, YOU are sinning against Christ because you have harmed one for whom he died. Here is how it could go down: Dr. Bill Baker writes,

"Paul believed that many of the minority position would be unduly influenced to let down their guard, to allow the social situation to override their religious scruples against eating the idol meat, and to ultimately join fully in the festivities. The resulting violation of their own beliefs about what is involved in being committed to Christ could cause them to question other aspects of their commitment. Perhaps, they would begin to think, "If it doesn't matter whether I segregate myself from my non-Christian neighbors in the matter of food, maybe other ways I have been instructed to separate myself from my culture don't matter, either. Maybe my Christian faith isn't as uniquely true as I was led to think it was." Paul was concerned that such scenarios could cause believers ultimately to lose their faith and thus their salvation."²

² William Baker, "[1 Corinthians](#)," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians*, vol. 15 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 123.

And because this concern is to be so concerning to those in the Church, notice Paul's conclusion:

v. 13 - **13 So if what I eat causes another believer to sin, I will never eat meat again as long as I live—for I don't want to cause another believer to stumble.**

Here is what it means to be the Church: if me exercising my freedom causes a fellow believer to sin, then I will stop exercising my freedom. What does it mean to be free? Does it mean that I get to do whatever I want? Not in the Church. Not when we are given the sacred responsibility of caring for and nurturing the faith of those around us.

John Stott – **"False freedom is a freedom from responsibility to God and others in order to live for ourselves. True freedom is freedom from ourselves in order to live for God and others."**³

This issue of how to live in the "gray" is complex and deeply nuanced. And we will wade out into the middle of it all over the next few weeks. But hear this first caution the Bible gives regarding how you exercise your freedom regarding TV, movies, entertainment, clothes, money, technology...above all other considerations, consider your brother or sister in Christ (one for whom Christ died). If your actions could potentially cause them to stumble in their faithfulness, then exercise your freedom by being free to NOT do that thing. Your love for God and love for your church family matter more than what you know and what you are free to do. We are The Church and this is how we love one another.

³ Tweet from @MattSmethurst, June 11, 2019.