

THE LIMITATIONS OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

TEXT: I CORINTHIANS 8:1-13

INTRODUCTION:

1. The *Scofield Bible* says this chapter is about, “Meats, and the limitations of Christian liberty.”
2. This epistle was written in response to a letter sent to the apostle Paul (cf. 7:1). There were questions regarding marriage, but apparently there were also questions regarding food offered to idols (8:1).
3. Was it permissible for Christians to eat meat that had been offered to idols?
4. This is not an issue for many Christians today, but the principles of Christian liberty do apply to all Christians. We can apply these principles to questionable things today.
5. This chapter, along with Romans 14 and 15, give us clear guidelines regarding these principles of Christian liberty.

1. **LOVE AND KNOWLEDGE**
2. **KNOWLEDGE AND CONSCIENCE**
3. **CONSCIENCE AND OFFENCE**

I. LOVE AND KNOWLEDGE

1. Debate and division had arisen in the church at Corinth concerning meat that had been offered to idols (8:1).
2. Corinth was a pagan city, and Christians were surrounded by pagans with their idolatrous customs. The meat that the heathen priests did not eat was sold in the public marketplace. This presented a problem for Christians since this meat was sacrificed to devils (cf. 10:19, 20).
3. Sometimes, a Christian would be invited for dinner, and the food had been offered up to devils. What should he do?
4. He knows “that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one” (8:4-6).
5. Therefore, his “knowledge” permitted him to freely eat the meat that had been offered to idols. However, others may not have this knowledge. Verse 7 says, “Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge...” In that case, eating the meat could cause others to stumble (8:9-13).

6. Paul makes an interesting statement in verse 1 – “Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.”
7. Too much knowledge can lead to pride – “Knowledge puffeth up...”
8. On the other hand, while knowledge puffs up, charity (love) builds up.
9. Albert Barnes said, “A man is usually much more likely to act right who is influenced by charity and love, than one who is guided by simple knowledge, or by self-confidence.”
10. The word translated “charity” means, “affection, good will, love, benevolence.”
11. The word translated “love” (8:3) is the verb form of the same word.
12. William MacDonald said, “Love foregoes its legitimate rights in order to promote the welfare of a brother.” A Christian may understand that is not sinful to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, but he should abstain if he knows it will offend a weaker Christian. That is the loving thing to do.
13. John Phillips says the “word conveys the idea of divine love, Calvary love, God’s love.” “For God so loved the world...” (John 3:16).
14. John Phillips refers to the parable of the Good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite had plenty of religious knowledge, but not much love. The good Samaritan had little religious knowledge, but had much love.
15. John Phillips says, “Knowledge is not to be despised, but without love it amounts to very little” (*Exploring 1 Corinthians*).
16. Ephesians 4:15 says, “speaking the truth in love.”
17. “And if any man think that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know (8:2). A wise man knows that he has much to learn, and he is aware of how much he does not know.
18. It has been said that truth without love is harsh, but love without truth is sentimentality. Some say, love without truth is hypocrisy. That is because Jesus said, “If ye love me, keep my commandments...If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in his love” (John 14:15; 15:10).
19. “But if any man love God, the same is known of him” (8:3). This is similar to Paul’s statement in II Timothy 2:19, “The Lord knoweth them that are his.” This knowledge is based on love.
20. Knowledge must be balanced by love, and knowledge must include an awareness of the feelings of others (8:9-13).

II. KNOWLEDGE AND CONSCIENCE

1. After love and knowledge, comes knowledge and conscience.
2. Paul uses the word “conscience” nine times in I Corinthians 8 & 10 (cf. 8:7, 10, 12; 10:25, 27, 28, 29).
3. Each person has conscience. Conscience must be instructed by Scripture. A conscience based on feelings becomes very unreliable.
4. First Timothy 4:2 refers to sinners “having their conscience seared with a hot iron.” The terrible acceptance of gross sin in modern society is paralleled by a decreasing sensitivity to conscience.
5. Paul knew “that an idol is nothing in the world” (8:4), but he was careful not to offend others. He wanted to offend no man’s conscience.
6. Paul said in Acts 23:1, “Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.”
7. And in Acts 24:16, “And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men.”
8. Because Paul had a tender conscience, he had sympathy for fellow believers who would not eat meat offered to idols -- “their conscience being weak is defiled” (8:7b).
9. “Weak” in this context refers to Christians who would not eat meat that had been offered up to idols (8:7-13).
10. Love puts others first (cf. 8:11-13).
11. Some Christians have a weak conscience because they seldom read the Bible and they seldom attend church services.
12. *Barnes’ Notes* says, “And their conscience being weak” (8:7b) means, “Being unenlightened on this subject; and being too weak to withstand the temptation in such a case. Not having a conscience sufficiently clear and strong to enable them to resist the temptation; to overcome all their former prejudices and superstitious feelings; and to act in an independent manner, as if an idol were nothing. Or their conscience was morbidly sensitive and delicate on this subject: they might be disposed to do right, and yet not have sufficient knowledge to convince them that an idol was nothing, and that they ought not to regard it.
13. Barnes says, “defiled” (8:7b) means, “polluted; contaminated...From superstitious reverence of the idol, he might think that he was doing right; but the effect would be to lead him to a conformity to idol worship that would defile his conscience, pollute his mind, and ultimately produce the deep and painful conviction of guilt. The general reply, therefore, of Paul to the first argument in favour of partaking of the meat offered in sacrifice to idols is, that all Christians have not full knowledge on the subject; and that

to partake of that might lead them into the sin of idolatry, and corrupt and destroy their souls.”

III. CONSCIENCE AND OFFENCE

1. “But meat commendeth us not to God” (8:8a). We are no worse off if we do not eat the meat, and we are no better off if we do eat it.
2. Eating meat, or abstaining from meat, cannot make a man better or worse in the sight of God.
3. But...” (8:9). Paul says “take heed” you do not offend your brethren.
4. Barnes says, “Though you may be no better or worse for eating or not eating, yet, if your conduct shall injure others, and lead them into sin, that is a sufficient guide to determine you what to do in the case. You should abstain entirely. It is of far more importance that your brother should not be led into sin, than it is that you should partake of meat which you acknowledge (8:8) is in itself of no importance.”
5. This is an important principle that is to regulate Christian conduct in all matters that are in themselves indifferent.
6. A man may have a right to do certain things, but it may not be wise or prudent to exercise his right.
7. Again, I will quote William MacDonald: “Love foregoes its legitimate rights in order to promote the welfare of a brother.”
8. “Wherefore...” (8:13). This is the conclusion of the whole matter. If eating meat “make my brother to offend,” that is, cause him to stumble, etc. “I will eat no flesh, etc.”
9. The law of love requires us to deny ourselves rather than to be the occasion of offending others. This is the position that “seeks the good of all; that can deny itself; that is supremely anxious for the glory of God and the salvation of man, and that can make personal comfort and gratification subservient to the good of others. It was the principle on which Paul always acted; and is the very spirit of the self-denying Son of God” (Barnes).

CONCLUSION:

1. I will conclude with a true story from Pastor W.A. Criswell.
2. At a meeting of the Texas legislature, they were having a hearing on a liquor bill, and a Protestant bishop appeared before the legislative committee; and he spoke eloquently, and he spoke learnedly, and he spoke conclusively.

3. And when the bishop had finished his address before the legislative committee on this liquor bill, he had spoken so splendidly and so conclusively that when he sat down, there was silence.
4. The bishop spoke in favor of moderation. He can take it, or he can leave it. He can share a drink with his parishioners. He believes that is his liberty. His view was indulgence was okay, but not too much.
5. And when he sat down, he had spoken so learnedly and so conclusively that there was silence in the room.
6. A humble old man arose and addressed the chairman of the committee if he would be allowed to speak.
7. The quiet, humble old man described a boy who was caught in the terrible habit of drinking and eventually became an alcoholic. Through the prayers of his mother, and through the love of his father, the boy was won back to health and won back to life.
8. He was doing fine again. He was successful. He became one of the up and coming young businessmen of the city.
9. Then one day, he was in a social gathering and liquor was served. And while they were there in that gathering and the liquor being served, they came to that young man, and he refused. "I can't take it," he said.
10. But they came again. And the young man looked around at that group, and he saw a minister standing there with a glass of liquor in his hand. And looking at the minister, he thought, "That's God's man. That's a well-known, respectable minister. I should be able to do what he does."
11. He took the glass of liquor, and he drank it. It was the first time he'd tasted liquor since the days when he was delivered from the bondage of alcohol addiction.
12. And he drank again. And that night, he drank again. And that night he drank again. And the young man went down, back like he was before, and he died a drunkard.
13. Then the old man paused and said, saying, "That boy was my boy, and the minister with whom he was drinking that night is the right reverend bishop who has just now addressed you."