

MESSAGE TRANSCRIPTS

Series: 1 Corinthians

Gray Areas Pt 1

The Principles of Christian Liberties

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Tim Armstrong, Senior Pastor

Weekend 01.29-30.11

Let's take our bibles. Turn together with me to 1 Corinthians, the book of 1 Corinthians. If you don't have a bible there should be one in the chair back in front of you. It's important to pull that out. If you don't know how to navigate a bible very well that's alright. We'll be putting the page numbers up on the side screens. It's important for you to have one out so you can follow along through the text. If you're just joining us; perhaps you're new to Crossroads; perhaps you showed up over the holiday that's fine. We have been actually involved in an exegetical study, which means verse by verse study through the book of 1 Corinthians. We took a break during the holidays but we're back in it today. We went through the first seven chapters. We're in chapter 8 and we're going to be moving forward.

Now, if you feel a little bit behind I can catch you up easily. The book of 1 Corinthians is an easy book because it's divided by a series of topics. The Apostle Paul is the one who actually planted the church at Corinth during his second missionary journey. He stayed there for a few years. Then he left. Shortly after his leaving they started to write of conflicts and divisions in the church and these conflicts and divisions were over a multitude of different topics. What the church did was they wrote their founding pastor; they wrote the Apostle Paul questions about these conflicts. Essentially, he wrote back the letter of 1 Corinthians to answer their questions. And so what we see as we move through the book, we move from topic to topic to topic and as we come to chapter 8 he introduces a brand new topic. And so if you're just joining us you're joining us for a brand new topic. You can catch up by reading the first seven chapters and discovering on your own those topics but as we move forward we're going to be looking at chapters 8, 9 and 10 because they all have to do with the same issue.

What we're going to be discovering as we unpack these three chapters is that Paul is teaching to the Corinthians what is called Christian liberties. Now, that might be a brand new term for you so let me give you a definition. A Christian liberty might be best understood as a conduct not specifically permitted or forbidden in the scripture. In other words, it's not a black and white issue. It might be best characterized as a gray area – something where the scriptures do not necessarily address and there are all kinds of issues, all kinds of topics in modern day life that the scriptures do not specifically address but yet we still have a principle of how we should look at these topics.

Now, some of these topics there neither right nor wrong because the scriptures don't give us a clear permission or clear forbidden. Rather, it is in the middle and so we have to use our own wisdom. We have to use some principles laid down through scriptures to determine should we be involved in this. Should our conduct be involved in this particular area. You say, what are some of these areas? Actually there are a number of them and as the church moves through history the Christian liberties and the gray areas change. Over the last about one-hundred years there are a number of gray areas that we could just reference. For example, drinking, smoking and gambling. These are some of the areas that are in Christian liberty gray areas. The scriptures don't give a sense of permission but at the same time they

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don't forbid them. You might be looking at me and saying I thought that drinking and smoking, gambling, chewing, going with women who do, you know, those kind of things that we shouldn't be doing those kind of things. But, you know, the scriptures aren't real clear on that. That would be a gray area.

Some of the others are like music. Certain types of music might be a gray area; whether a woman should have makeup on or adorn herself. There are some groups that say you shouldn't do that. Well, it's more of a gray area. Dancing, movies, Sunday activities. Back in the late sixties, early seventies birth control was a big gray area for the church; women working outside the home, the hair length of men had been an issue; whether or not we should get tattoos. These are all the types of gray areas. In other words, the scriptures don't specifically talk about them.

One of the things that we have to be mindful of is that the scriptures do make clear that the Christian life is centered on the truth of freedom. For example, Jesus said in John 8:31 if you abide in my Word you are truly my disciple and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. There is that aspect of freedom. Paul writes to the Corinthians, 2 Corinthians 3:17, where the spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. Galatians 5:1, for freedom, Christ has set us free stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. We are meant to be free in Christ.

But now a question immediately arises that if we're called to freedom how do we balance this freedom in these gray areas? If the scriptures are not specific, how do we know if these acts, these conducts are right or wrong? I tell you, it's real easy to go off the deep end. In fact, there are two extremes in this spectrum; in this discussion.

The first extreme is Legalism and that's an extreme that says you know what, there are really no gray areas. Everything is black and white. Legalists live by rules. They live by do's and don'ts. By the way, can you think of the legalist group in the New Testament? They were the Pharisees. They were so concerned about the law that they actually put laws and rules on top of the law. They were called fence laws. They were into black and white. You know what Legalists – sometimes they can look very spiritual but it's not necessarily spirituality you're seeing. You're just seeing them structure and codify their life very specifically. And that's just the absolute opposite of spirituality.

On the other side of the spectrum Legalism you go over the licentiousness and licentiousness is there are not boundaries; everything is permitted that is not expressly forbidden in scripture. Both are extreme. What we find the Apostle Paul doing in Corinthians is bringing a balance. He doesn't give us a list of do's and don'ts. What he does is he gives us a universal principle regardless of what era, what epoch, what time of history you're in you can use that principle to determine the gray areas – Christian Liberties.

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Now, I want you to notice the area the Apostle Paul is speaking in. We see this right off the bat in verse 1 of chapter 8. He says now concerning food offered to idols. Stop right there. He says look at this situation in Corinth. It doesn't look anything like the situation you and I might be involved with in the 21st Century. You and I do not have an issue with food being sacrificed to idols. This was a specific issue but this is the gateway. This is Paul's instructions on liberties set amidst the backdrop of a specific issue that was ripping the church apart in that day and age.

Let me set this in context for you. Let me give you a definition so you can see how we can take this once gray area and bring it into the future and learn from it. What we need to do is set a set a parameters and definitions. I experience that this week. I picked Jack up from school, Jack's my son, six years old, picked him up, he comes climbing in the truck and he said dad, you're not going to believe what we did today. We went to the high school to an assembly and saw Oprah. I said, you did what? You saw Oprah? I said, what do you mean by that? He said, yeah, you know. Those people who go aahahahahahhah. That's how he defined it for me. I said oh, you mean opera. Ok. Ok. We defined it then and we can understand it. That's what I need to do with you today because we don't all his this issue with meat sacrificed to idols.

What was going on in the day? Well, you need to understand that the Greek world, at that particular time, very poly-theistic. In other words they worshipped many, many gods. Not only were they poly-theistic. They were poly-demonistic. In other words they believed in many, many evil spirits. In fact, they thought evil spirits were everywhere; under every rock; behind every corner and they were so fearful of these evil spirits that they had concocted this idea that evil spirits, if they get inside you will destroy you and the way they get inside you is by attaching themselves to food. And so, as you consumed the food these evil spirits become a part of you and become inside of you and so they created this ritual where they would take their food, specifically their meat down to the temple and the priest would sacrifice their food before an idol cleansing him. The way he would do this is he would give a small portion of that food to the idol. That would appease the idol. The priest would take a small portion of that food for himself and then he would give the rest to the family.

What was interesting was this was really tied to their economics as well because family after family after family was doing this and they would bring this meat to the priest which was more than he could personally consume and so he would take that meat, he would turn around, he would sell it at the market and so if a family came in and they didn't have food they would go to the market and rather than having to take that food over to the priest they would just go and they would buy food already that had been sacrificed; meat that had already been sacrificed to an idol. So, it was like a one stop shop deal but what happened is this became prolific around the culture. And so there was meat sacrificed to idols

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everywhere. You couldn't go to a function that didn't have meat that was sacrificed to an idol. You couldn't go to a wedding ceremony. You couldn't go to a banquet. You couldn't go to a festival. You couldn't go to a personal friends gathering without probably being exposed to meat that had been ceremonially cleansed, ceremonially given to an idol. It was causing a problem for the church. Why? I'll tell you why. Because there were two groups of people in the Corinthian church.

The first group didn't have any problem whatsoever with meat sacrificed to idols. They understood that they were redeemed by Christ. They believed in one God. They didn't think there were all these evil spirits running around. They knew an idol was really nothing so they saw this as just meat. Meat was just meat. They didn't have an issue with it. That was the first group.

The second group was not quite as strong in their faith and actually they could not even be around meat that was sacrificed to an idol without it bringing back memories of their old life before Christ. In fact, if they were in a situation where they were offered this meat they would either have to make excuses or they would have to just decided not to attend certain gatherings so as not to put themselves in that place because it would bother their conscience.

Now, the first group looked at the second group and shook its head and said I don't understand what the issue it. In other words, they were saying it's a liberty. It's not real. It's not a problem. Get over it. In fact, they would rather insensitive about it. Now, listen to me carefully. I don't want you to miss this. The majority of Paul's comments through chapter 8 deals with that first group. He speaks specifically to them. I think he's speaking so specifically because I think it was that first group that was part of writing the letter to Paul in the first place because when you read through chapter 8 you get this sense that this first group that didn't have a problem with meat sacrificed to idols sets up three types of, you might say – debates before Paul to prove that this is not an issue. And in a sense they were asking Paul, if you read between the lines, to really rebuke the second group and allow the freedoms to flourish for the first group. You say, how did you figure this out by reading chapter 8? There's a clue. Paul uses quotation marks through chapter 8 to refer back to what that group had originally said to him. Keep that in mind. I'm going to lead you through the text and we'll work it out together. Keep that concept of the quote marks in your mind.

Alright, let's first look it up. We'll look through it. He says now, concerning food offered to idols we know, notice right off the back, "all of us possess knowledge". This is the first argument that that group, who didn't have a problem with meat sacrificed to idols. This is the first argument that they make. What's the argument? They say we have knowledge. Well, what kind of knowledge did they have? They said, well, we know the Word of God. We know it's just food. We know it's no big deal. Paul is repeating back to them their argument and he says this in verse 1 continuing. He says this knowledge, saying this knowledge that

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you say, watch this he's going to rebuke them, puffs you up. He says you have knowledge. You think you know the Word of God. Well, what has happened is this knowledge has puffed you up. This concept of puffed up is a figure of speech that means you become egotistical. You become prideful. You become conceited in your knowledge. He goes on to say, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God he is known by God. In other words, you know what Paul is saying? He's saying, listen; you're saying knowledge is my base for how I should act? Paul says no. Knowledge is not the base. Love is the base and you're not asking in love.

Actually, interesting – if you follow the concept of puffed up through 1 Corinthians Paul uses it six different times to describe the attitude of the Corinthians. They had a real problem. They had a real pride problem which is showing up in this particular discussion. Now, he continues. Look. Verse 4. Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols we know that, notice again, an idol “has no real existence” and that “there is no God but one”. He's repeating back their second argument. Do you see the second argument? The second argument is that they say you know, we know that idols don't really exist. We know that they're nothing. They're just carved wood or carved stone. In fact, they could say with the Psalmist, Psalm 115:4 & 5, the idols they have eyes but they cannot see. They have a mouth but they cannot speak. They have ears but they cannot hear. They have hands but they cannot reach out. In other words, these idols are not reality. There's nothing real to them. They would go on and confirm we believe in one true God.

You know up to this point Paul would have said, I agree with you. I agree one hundred percent. Just keep reading. Look at verse 5. He says, although there may be so called gods in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many little g, gods and many lords, yet, for us there is one God, the Father from whom are all things and for whom we exist and one Lord Jesus Christ through whom are all things and through whom we exist. He's saying I totally agree with you. You're argument is valid but just like you were puffed up with knowledge and lack in love you're demonstrating that again.

In this next verse Paul reminds them that these so called gods possess a type of reality for some people. Look at it. He says, verse 7, however, not all possess this knowledge but some through former association. Remember that – we're going to come back to it. Through former association with idols eat food as really offered to an idol and they're conscience, being weak is defiled. In other words, their conscience, if they practice this would cause them to sin. Do you hear what Paul is saying? He is saying to the first group don't forget there are people from a former way of life who used to practice idolatry. This is a gray area for you but it's not a gray area for them. In fact, if they participate in this, even though it's a gray area and the scriptures don't give a specific allowance or forbiddance about it to them if they would practice it they would feel like they were sinning.

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Do you know how you can play this out in modern day? You know for many people alcohol is not a big deal. It's not a big deal at all. In fact, it's a legitimate gray area in scripture. We don't really find much in scripture that forbids the use of alcohol. There's some rare occasions, usually when it's in excess. But for many the church through some time have said alcohol can be dangerous to your spiritual life. And, in fact, for some alcohol has risen to a point of a sin if you partake in it. This is truly a Christian liberty in our culture today but if you were, say, part of the first group that said well, there's not problem with alcohol. That's not an issue at all. I should be able to use my liberty. There are some, and you need to be mindful of this, there are some who exist today in the second group who come out of a lifestyle where alcohol was a real issue for them. Say they come over to your home and you're not really thinking about having an issue with this and you offer it to them. Do you know what happens? We actually place them in a difficult position. In fact, we become the point of temptation for them to maybe partake in something they normally wouldn't. And say they do and they go home and later they start to think I should have never done that. I just feel like I regressed in my spiritual life. I just sinned. That's a reality today. That was a reality then. It just had a different context.

Now, this group, this first group gives one more argument. It's found in verse 8 and you're not going to see quotes but I get the sense that this is what they said to Paul. I think they said for their third argument – but Paul, food will not commend us to God. In other words, food would draw us closer to God. And Paul agrees with that. Keep reading. He says, you're right. We're no worse off if we do not eat and no better off if we do. He's just completely agreeing with them. He's agreeing, if you notice, with every single point of theirs. He's saying you're right. You have knowledge. The Word of God doesn't expressly forbid it. It's your liberty. He says you're right. An idol doesn't really exist. You're right. There is one God; no other God. He says you're right. Food will not commend us to God. But, you have forgotten one of the cardinal aspects of Christianity. And he's about ready to give us a principle. Ready? We're at that point.

He's not going to tell them black and white; dos and don'ts. He's going to give them the principle and we can extract that principle out of the ages and bring us right into today. It doesn't matter what the gray area is. It's found in verse 9. He says but, take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. There's the principle. Do you see it?

Let me take you over to another passage before I just elaborate on the principle. It's in Philippians. I just want to show you this because this is not the only time this particular principle is laid forth for us in scripture. Philippians chapter 2, again, written by the Apostle Paul. And let's start in verse 3. He says, I want to remember this as you're practicing your Christian life. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit but in humility count others as more

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significant than yourselves. Let each of you look, follow this, not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others. Now, flip back to 1 Corinthians. Look at verse 9. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. What is the principle?

Here's the principle: before you exercise any Christian freedom consider how it will impact others. Just bring Philippians and 1 Corinthians together and what do you have? You have a clear principle that the Christian liberty is never about you but we must be concerned about the impact on others. That's where Paul starts. He says, the last thing you want to do is be a stumbling block. *Próskomma* is the Greek word. It literally means to cause to fall. The figure of speech means to cause to fall into sin. You don't want to be that person.

Look at the end of verse 9. You don't want to be a stumbling block to the, who's he say? To the weak. He says there are some in the church who are strong. They're spiritually stronger than others. And sometimes the spiritually strong they look at Christian liberties and gray areas differently. There are some in the church who are weak and they see these as not Christian liberties or gray areas. They see them more like black and white that can lead them into sin.

And so, what is he saying? He's saying to you who are strong consider the weak. Don't be a stumbling block. And he gives us a case scenario. Do you see that in verses 10, 11 and 12? Here's the scenario. For if anyone sees you have knowledge eating in an idol's temple will he not become encouraged if his conscience is weak to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed. This idea of destroyed is fall into sin. It's very similar to the concept of stumbling. The brother for whom Christ died.

Now, let me give it to you in a scenario like this: They're walking down the street; a street in any given Middle Eastern town. Here it's in Corinth and they look over and they see you and you're eating in the Idol Café and here you are. You're eating an idol steak. And they look and they think you know what, if he can do that well then certainly I can do that. And so this person wanders in, sits down, orders an idol steak, begins to eat and as he eats he's thinking, you know what, this meat was sacrificed to an idol. I used to worship idols. I don't worship idols. I worship Christ. Oh no. What have I done? I've sinned against my Lord and why? It was all because they thought it was ok; because they saw another brother – maybe someone they looked up to practicing it. And look at what Paul says in verse 12. Thus, sinning against your brother and wounding their conscience what do you actually do? You actually sin against Christ. He says you don't want to be in that position.

Paul goes one step further. He says I'll be an example. He says, verse 13, therefore if food makes my brother stumble I'll never eat meat lest I make my brother stumble. Which, by the way, you can take the word food and just blank it out and replace any Christian liberty.

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Therefore, if blank Christian liberty makes my brother stumble I will never blank Christian liberty lest I make my brother fall. That's what Paul is saying.

You say, wait a minute. How do I know if my conduct is right or wrong? I still have questions have Christian liberty. Paul's going to get there. He's going to start that discussion in chapter 9. He's going to start helping us unpack the pattern of Christian liberties in our lives but he doesn't start there. He starts first, not with the pattern but with the principle in chapter 8. Do you know why? Because if you don't start with the principle then Christian liberties become all about you and that's where a lot of times these discussions start. It's my right. I don't have a problem. I should be allowed to do that. That's what that first group was saying to Paul. And Paul says – no. You've missed it. You start with the principle before you exercise Christian freedom consider how it will impact others first.

Why do we live this way? Why would be willingly displace the use of Christian liberties in our own life for someone else? Well, why do we do anything? Remember what Paul says in Corinthians? He says whatever you eat or drink, whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Why do we put in place this principle? For the glory of God. That's why we do it.

Do you remember what we sang just a moment ago? Do you remember what Milo and the Student Ministry Team was leading us in? They were leading us in reflection on how Christ rescued us; how Christ sacrificed for us; how Christ gave grace to us even when we didn't merit that grace. Do you see the supreme of example of displacing self for the good of another? I mean, it's represented in the very fabric of Christianity. It's represented in Christ himself and so when we do this – displace our own right for the concern and care for another we're actually bringing glory to Christ. We're living out our Christianity. Start with the principle. Next week we look at the pattern. Let's pray.