

The Proper Use of Christian Liberty

1 Corinthians 8

1 Corinthians 8: *"Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. 2 And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. 3 But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him. 4 Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live. 7 However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 8 But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse. 9 But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. 10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? 11 And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? 12 But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble."*

Background Notes:

In chapter 7 Paul began to answer questions that the Corinthian Christians had raised in a letter they had written to him. He answered questions about sex, marriage and celibacy. Now in chapter 8, Paul taught about the proper use of Christian liberty.

What do we mean by "Christian liberty"? Christian liberty is what we obtain and experience when we become Christians. We are free from the penalty of sin. We are free from the Law - free from the ceremonial laws and regulations of the Old Testament Mosaic Law. We don't have to bring sheep and oxen to the altar to sacrifice today.

However, we are not to be "law-less." We are not free from God's moral laws. However, we are free from the Old Testament Mosaic Law, and free to enjoy a new life in Christ.

There are two possible dangers associated with our proper use of Christian liberty. One danger is that we don't stand firm in our Christian liberty. If we begin to think that we are more spiritual if we keep a bunch of manmade rules, we will slide back into legalism.

The Galatian Christians were falling back from their liberty in Christ. They were starting to keep the Jewish laws. They were becoming involved in the bondage of legalism once again. In Galatians 5:1 Paul wrote, *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”*

The other danger associated with the proper use of our Christian liberty is letting our liberty go to license – the idea that, as freed-up believers, we can do whatever we want. It’s the attitude that “since Jesus died for all my sins and I have eternal life for sure, I can now go out and sin all I want.” Right? Wrong! Galatians 5:13 says, *“For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”* 1 Peter 2:16 says, *“As free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God.”*

So there are two obvious wrong extremes to the use of our Christian liberty - not standing firm in our liberty and becoming legalists, or using our Christian liberty as a license to sin. Avoiding these two dangerous and sinful extremes, we follow biblical guidelines to properly use our Christian liberty. Where Christians differ is in the area of activities of **“moral indifference”** - activities that are not specifically stated as being “right or wrong” in Scripture. When Christians differ in opinion and conscience on matters of moral indifference, we must be tolerant of one another, and loving towards one another.

In the 1st century Church, the question arose about eating food that had been offered to idols. In answer to this question, the apostle Paul gave two outstanding biblical principles for the proper use of Christian liberty.

Doctrinal Point

1. The right use of Christian liberty involves knowledge and love.

“Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies”(v1).

In the 1st century Roman culture, animal sacrifices were made to the Roman and Greek “gods,” represented by statues or idols. Many public feasts and festivals were dedicated to these gods. So questions and different opinions arose among the early Christians.

When meat that was had been part of a pagan sacrifice to a false “god” was sold in the marketplace, was a Christian free to buy and eat this meat? What about eating at restaurants where the meat served had been offered to idols? And what about public events where the food, along with everything else, was dedicated to the “gods”? What was the answer to this important 1st century question, and how does it apply to us today?

The question was, “Is it OK to eat the meat, because idols are really just wood or stones? We know that they’re not real gods. There’s only one true God.” Now Paul certainly realized that demons were associated with these idols, and that

there were demonic forces behind the Greek and Roman public feasts and festivals (10:20). When we get to chapter 10 we'll see that for the Christians to participate in any way in these pagan feasts and festivals was wrong, because it was idolatry.

But the point here was that the Corinthian believers knew and understood that food didn't somehow become intrinsically evil or contaminated if dedicated to one of these idols representing the Greek and Roman gods. Therefore, apart from participating in the idolatrous feasts and festivals, it was all right to buy the meat to eat at home, or to eat it in a restaurant. Paul made it clear that because they knew and understood that the Greco-Roman "gods" were not real, it was OK to eat that food at home or in public places. Corinthians, your Christian liberty allows you to eat this food.

However, continued Paul, **knowledge is not the only thing that governs the proper use of our Christian liberty!** We are also to be governed by **Christian love**. Knowledge by itself can lead to pride. There must be Christian love for "edification" - for building up the body of Christ (v1). In fact, without love there can be no true knowledge (v2). So if you really love God and are in fellowship with Him (v3), you will love your fellow believers enough to properly use your Christian liberty. You will not flaunt your Christian liberty, and thus stumble a weaker brother or sister in the Lord. After all, if immature believers see you in a restaurant eating meat that they know has been dedicated to an idol, they may be shocked, and stumbled in their Christian growth.

Eating meat dedicated to idols is not an issue in our culture today, but there are other issues. One example is alcoholic beverages. The Bible teaches that we should not get drunk, but what about occasional social drinking? Or having a beer on a hot day? Or drinking a glass of wine with dinner? Here's where Christians differ in their opinions - and in their consciences. Here's where the proper use of Christian liberty is called for.

If you are a believer, and you feel perfectly free to drink a beer or a glass of wine, just be careful not to do it if a younger or weaker Christian might be stumbled in their Christian growth as a result. Verses 9-12 once again, with this issue in view: "*But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.*"

So out of love for our Christian brothers, we should limit our Christian liberty. Verse 13: "*Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*" In other words, using the issue of alcoholic beverages: Therefore if having a beer or a glass of wine makes my brother stumble, I will never drink again lest I cause my brother to stumble in his life of faith.

Romans 14:21 says, "*It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.*" The right use of Christian liberty involves knowledge and love.

2. The wrong use of Christian liberty involves sin against Christ.

Verse 12: *“But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.”* If we don’t properly use and limit our Christian liberty, we not only sin against our weak fellow believers, but we sin against Christ. This is serious!

However, it’s important to distinguish between a “weak” brother and a “legalistic” brother. The weaker brother has a tender conscience concerning certain things because of lack of knowledge and past experience. Christians should not flaunt their Christian liberty and stumble the weaker brother.

On the other hand, the legalistic brother is not a weaker brother. The legalist has developed a certain set of rules for how he believes Christians should live. He keeps these rules and he expects every other Christian to keep them too – such as, “Not a drop of any alcoholic drink will ever touch my lips.” A legalist is not “stumbled” when he sees other Christians break his set of rules. He just judges you as being “unspiritual,” according to his own set of rules.

So don’t worry about stumbling the legalist. In fact, don’t live under the tyranny of the legalist’s conscience! You’d have to live your life in a straightjacket, because there’s always at least one legalist out there that will find fault with just about everything you do!

Legalists are not stumbled. It’s the younger, weaker brothers and sisters who can be stumbled and hindered in their Christian growth, and that’s who we’re talking about here. We are to be concerned about the tender conscience and the growth in Christ of these believers, and we are not to sin against them by stumbling them. The wrong use of Christian liberty involves sin against Christ.

Practical Application:

Don’t think, “Me first”!

It’s human nature to think, “Me first.” In fact, it takes work and dedicated willpower not to selfishly think of ourselves first. The only way to properly use and limit our Christian liberty is to not think, “Me first.”

The more you’re involved in Christian leadership, the more important this practical application becomes. Younger, less mature believers are looking to you. Christian leaders are to be models of what it means to follow Jesus Christ.

Do you want to be a good Christian leader? Do you want to properly use your Christian liberty? If so, **think of others first!**