

“Dealing With the “Weaker Brother” In Controversy (Meat offered to idols)”

1 Cor. 8:1-10:11;10:12-22; 23-33

10/15/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

In order to catch us up with Paul’s letter and help us make better sense of the fragment of scripture upon which we are focusing, I’ll summarize what Paul’s messenger had read to these people just before these verses in chapter ten. As Paul started chapter 8, he turned to one of the many conflicts that were raging in that small house-church of about 100 people – eating meat in a meal that had been used by the pagan temples for their sacrificial rituals in their worship of idols. It doesn’t seem like a big deal to us today because idolatry at pagan temples is not an issue today. Instead, we pay our money for products advertised by our electronic worship of idols,¹ so usually no meat is involved for us.

Here is what happened in that church. Some of those parishioners were Jews who had converted to Christianity. They had come from a lifetime of watching what they ate as an ethnic tradition of worshipping God. Certain foods were kosher and most other foods they didn’t touch because of their religion’s strict dietary regulations.

On top of that was the fact that the meat, that had briefly been used in the pagan rituals in worshipping idols, symbolized the idolatry that Israel had historically refused to tolerate. Their entire Feast of the Tabernacles holiday, known better as “Hanukkah” today, commemorated a time in their history when people were willing to be martyrs, suffering horrible torture and death, for not worshipping the Emperor’s idols and eating forbidden food. In this one isolated case, the Jews won over the bad guys.² So no way were Christians, with Jewish ancestry, *ever* going to feel comfortable going out for a few beers and steaks at the corner Outback Restaurant that was run out of the back of the temple to Zeus.

Then there were the Gentile converts to Christianity, in that church, who had bought the discounted temple meat at the market every week for

their entire lives. Some of them even used to worship at the those temples and often muttered something about how they never really worshipped the statues themselves – they were there just to guide people visually in their prayers.

This meat was a good deal for protein and was usually the best available. Buying the meat was no big deal to them and if they couldn’t bring this meat along to the church pot luck dinners, fine! They’d just as soon take it home and eat it and not have to share it.

So with people quoting Paul in their arguments on both sides, the arguments were centering on whether it was ethically wrong for a Christian to appear to support the pagan worship cults by buying and eating temple outlet meat. Here’s how Paul tried to guide their thinking on this one.

In Chapter 8, verses 4-6, Paul argued that most everybody knows that the gods and goddesses of those idols don’t really exist. There is no god but One. ‘For us,’ Paul said, ‘there is just the one God for whom all things and for Whom we exist – all through one Lord: Jesus Christ.’

But Paul conceded, (in verses 7-12), that everyone wasn’t on the same page on this one. Not everyone was knowledgeable enough to confidently say that those gods were merely a figment of their needy imaginations. Some people were weak and tended to get all bent out of shape if they saw someone, they respected in the faith, having a Zeus double-cheese burger.

‘Unfortunately,’ Paul went on, ‘we know food that is eaten or refused doesn’t get us anywhere with God – so it simply isn’t an issue with us. A physical thing isn’t bad in itself.’³ Because there are some good-hearted but weak believers around, you’ve got to be sensitive – you need to have some empathy.’

(*Continuing to paraphrase Paul’s intent*), . . .
‘You can’t go through your life acting as if your level

¹ Meaning, our television commercials convince us to purchase products to support the media idols we worship.

² In the Maccabean war.

³ There two at least two slogans that were common in that church: “All things are lawful for me” and “Food is for the belly, the belly for food.”

of sophistication in ethics is an entity in itself and anyone else (who doesn't see it your way) is just stupid. You can't act like that because in a way, we are all connected and it matters where people are in their personal spiritual growth.'

Paul suggested as a remedy, (in 8:13), that he was going to stay away from meat if eating it would cause another believer to become truly troubled in their spiritual pilgrimage. But we should be careful, though, because Paul was not saying he was going to avoid the meat just because someone else disagreed with him. He was much too feisty to do that. He was only talking about the case where a young believer was honestly struggling with emotional and intellectual turmoil over what they truly believed was dishonoring to God by patronizing the pagan temple meat outlets.

Most of chapter 9, that followed, was said in self-defense of some of his critics who had complained that he was getting compensation for being a missionary. And his talk about his compensation for his ministry work is actually out of context of his ongoing discussion of the meat-offered-to-idols issue.⁴

But by chapter 9, verse 19 and onward, Paul moves back to the issue about the tension between freedom from legalism and the ethical tensions involved in this dietary matter.

He pointed out that when he was with Jewish people, he was very Jewish. When he was with Gentile people, he spoke their language. When he was with so-called "weak" people, in some ways he apparently accommodated his speaking style and manner to their level of growth in their faith. Paul, here, was essentially saying that 'when he was in Rome, he acted as did the Romans' – but only for the sake of getting out his gospel message.⁵

⁴ His argument was that soldiers and farmers get paid and it's the law – so why shouldn't people in his job get compensation for being an apostle? It just happens that he makes his living spreading the gospel. He's not in it for the money anyway, (verse 18), he's just making the gospel of Jesus available to everyone and that's how he gets his satisfaction.

⁵ He was not being artificial. It's just that he was adapting to the mentality and tradition of his audience.

(In 9:22-23): "To the weak I became weak in order that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people that I might, by all means, save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings."

To make sure they got his point, he ended chapter 9 by saying 'Like a race, we're all running, trying to compete. Not everyone gets the prize but everyone, who is in there, has to exercise some self-control in all things. So don't disqualify me because I'm in there trying my best.'⁶

As Paul started chapter 10, keep in mind that he was talking to people who were genuinely having a hard time because of the controversy over eating meat from the pagan temples. In 10:1-11, Paul was trying to warn the others, (who didn't have a problem eating the meat), about being so self-assured with their new freedom from the law. He was also giving them a practical tip about being sensitive to "weaker" Christians (who really wanted their religion and ethical work to be much easier – more black and white). So here is Paul's reasoning (expressed more in the way that we speak today).

'You've got to watch out that you don't mess up like your ancestors in Israel,' he started. 'What happened to them? Well, in the wilderness they followed the cloud (God used to lead them), they walked through the parted sea, ate the supernatural manna and drank the water from the supernatural rock.'⁷ Yet after all that, they still weren't sitting as pretty with God as they thought. (10:5) 'That's why they were overthrown in the wilderness,' Paul said in taking a little jab at them.

'All these events in the wilderness,' Paul continued, 'were really written to warn us (in our own time). Your ancestor's idolatry ruined their lives,' he was saying. 'They sat down to party (eating and drinking) and then got up to dance. But 23,000 were wiped out in a single day,' Paul soberly pointed out.⁸

⁶ Again, an obvious paraphrase of 9:24-27. Paul was apparently thinking about the Olympic-like athletic contests held at Isthmian Games at the time.

⁷ Here he inserts an interesting rabbinical midrash that the rock was, in some way symbolic of the Christ.

⁸ Numbers 25:1-9 recalls 24,000 being killed for their idolatry and illicit sexual relations with the Moabites who were given to

‘When your ancestors did that,’ Paul said, ‘they were putting God to the test and were destroyed themselves. So as that was written as a warning to you,’ Paul went on, ‘if any of you think that you will stand, you will fall’ – and then Paul talked further about temptation. Here are Paul’s words on temptation but they were immediately followed by his return to give practical advice about Christians balancing their freedom from legalism with sensitivity to weaker and more fearful believers.

1st Corinthians 10:12-22

This text, (from 10:12-15), was about temptation. You’ve heard the surrounding context, so keep Paul’s words about temptation here in the context of his overall discussion about eating meat from the pagan temple outlets.

When Paul said that “God will not allow us to be tested beyond our power to remain firm, giving us the strength to endure it and provide a way out.” – this is where a lot of church leaders have forgotten about the context. All your life, you may have heard that verse about God not giving us anything we’re not strong enough to endure – as if Paul said that independently and apart from his discussion of the meat issue.

When we hear the word “endure,” we usually think of enduring suffering, but this is not about suffering. If it were, one would have to conclude that God personally causes our suffering and that God is doing the so-called “testing.” As always, most misinterpretations of the scriptures happen when we forget the context.

Paul was only talking about **moral temptation** – particularly falling into idolatry (and other immoral things associated with the pagan idol cult – like temple prostitution.) He was also warning the more sophisticated Christians – who knew it didn’t matter whether or not they ate the temple meat. He was warning them not to be so self-assured. He was not saying *God* morally tempts us.

Over in the book of James, it flatly said that God does not tempt us – but we get ourselves into our own trouble. And here, Paul was stating that in the case of a test of our morality, we never face a **moral decision** where we do not have the capacity to somehow

worship of Baal of Peor.

choose the right course of action. Somehow, Paul was saying, God provides a way out (or at least an alternative choice to doing what is wrong.) But one writer correctly suggested, I believe, that “a major moral enormity of our century is a view that evil is only something outside ourselves, ‘over there,’ separate from us (who are well-meaning).”⁹ Many people today feel that *life* has left them few options – as if God, the great card dealer in the sky, has dealt them a poor hand of cards with which to play.

There is an old folk song that finds amusement in the old attempts of Freudian psychoanalysis to blame our behavior on external forces. Its words are:

“I went to my psychiatrist to be psychoanalyzed, to find out why I killed the cat and blacked my husband’s eyes.

He laid me on a counseling couch to see what he could find, and here is what he dredged up from my deep subconscious mind:

When I was one, my mommy hid my dolly in a trunk, and so it follows, naturally, that I am always drunk.

When I was two, I saw my father kiss the maid one day, and that is why I suffer now from kleptomania.

At three I had the feeling of ambivalence toward my brothers, and so it follows, naturally, I poison all my lovers.

But I am happy, now I’ve learned the lesson this has taught, that everything I do, that’s wrong, is someone else’s fault.”¹⁰

Ethically we *tend* to think that wrong or evil is always “out there,” embodied *in others* or *their*

⁹There were a few historical circumstances where that might not have been the case – such as the holocaust. In the fictional film *Sophie’s Choice*, the character appeared to be a victim, incapable of responsibility because of their powerlessness. The Sophie character experienced such a debilitating agony in her having to choose which of her daughters would survive that she was driven to wallow in the despair of a paranoid schizophrenic friend, just to keep her mind off the pain of her past.

See: Marilyn French, “Why ‘Sophie’ Doesn’t Break Your Heart” *Ms* (March 1983) p.29,30.

¹⁰ Anna Fussell folk song, quoted from J. Adama, *Competent to Council*, p.8. (out of print)

actions, instead of being within us. Perhaps it is like my attitude about my snoring.

Whenever I fall asleep laying on my back, I wake up in the middle of the night to the sound of one snore sound. So naturally I think that Linda must have made that one snore sound because that's all I heard and it certainly wasn't me. So I roll over and go back to sleep, *graciously* not saying anything to Linda, who must have already gone back to sleep – not having been awakened by her single snore sound.

Jump to another scene in the Bible in Jesus' life. Some of the Pharisees were so focused on expertly following their own elaborate list of right and wrong behaviors, that Jesus called them "white-washed tombs." Suggesting that on the outside, they appeared to be pinnacles of spirituality but within, they were filled with rotteness. Imagine seeing their faces after Jesus said that. Suppose He would have said that to us?

Less overstated, perhaps, maybe the arena of our greatest moral tension is within us, not externally in others.

Another factor in our self-concept is our negative side. Groucho Marx once quipped, "I'd never join any club that would accept a person like me!" We smile at that because we know sometimes we feel that way.

Wayne Dyer, in his book *Your Erroneous Zones*, suggested that in our adulthood we put our self-worth down for many reasons.

1. We can have a built-in excuse for why we can not get love in life – we feel we simply are not worth being loved back.
2. By doubting our true worth, we can avoid any and all risks that go with establishing love relationships with others – therefore eliminating any possibility of ever being rejected or disapproved.
3. By staying the way we are, feeling we are unworthy to grow or be better or happier, it is less work because there is less change.
4. We gain some pity and attention by putting ourselves down
5. We can avoid a lot of disciplined decision making by not taking charge of our own lives –

feeling that we are not capable of making intelligent decisions for ourselves.¹¹

Because of our lousy self-concepts, most of us feel we could benefit from books, courses and group-sharing experiences which help us assertively take charge of our own lives. Because of our faltering self-concepts, we easily fall into what Eric Burnes described as the "Yes-but" game.¹² You remember this. When someone gives us a positive suggestion, for an alternate choice we could adopt, we say "Yes, . . . but" and then give an excuse for why destiny doesn't really permit us to make that choice.

The point we're coming to is this: Within us there is a continual tension in how we feel about our worth. The good in us can overlook and not learn from our failures. The failing part of us can overlook the good that we already are. The balancing of that tension affects the accuracy of our view of reality.

At any given moment, we can be saying, like the Pharisee praying on the street corner, 'Thanks, God, for not making me like that sinner over there in the gutter.' Or, we can be saying "I don't want to get involved – I could never make much of a difference anyway. In trying to counter-balance our inflated egos, Philippians said, 'count others, in humility, better than yourself.' To counter-balance our low self-concepts, Jesus said 'love others as you love yourselves.'

In terms of where all this leaves you and me, it always comes back to finding a balance. A balance in terms of who we are as a person whom God has made. You and I are beings who are indwelled by God's Holy Spirit, yet we find ourselves stumbling along in life, trying the best we can but seeing sometimes we haven't really tried at all.

So how can we approach controversial issues with others who also struggle with ethical decisions? Paul's advice, I think, is brilliant. He says make your ethical choices as best you can but when it comes to the "weaker" person in the faith, be sensitive. Don't be tempted to think that your freedom from the law means you are an ethical island to yourself. We are all connected so be sensitive and empathetic – be humble

¹¹ Wayne Dyer, *Your Erroneous Zones* (New York: Avon, 1976)

¹² His work: *Games People Play*

when you're in the presence of someone who is genuinely struggling with an issue.

1st Corinthians 10:23-33

I think Paul was telling those church members that in terms of struggling with newly emerging ethical issues, they were all on the same team. Each of them were in the game with different skills and varying playing abilities. That it was OK to be in a different spot than the others on the team as long as they didn't become so independent that they lose their sense of cooperation and connectedness.

When I was in college, I played on the soccer team. I had good speed but I wasn't the fastest. I had fairly good ball control but the two, on either side of me, were much better ball carriers down the field. I had a relatively weak shot because my legs were not as developed as others – particularly those who regularly worked out their legs with weights. But I did have an accurate shot and the spatial perception on where to pass it as I put it in a good position for this all-American right wing player beside me.

When I missed a shot on goal or if I had the ball taken away from me, I figured the next time was going to be much better. I kept at it and being on the team enabled me to learn that I was able to contribute part of my skill that would excel – and when I failed, I could forget it and look toward the next opportunity. I found acceptance. I found forgiveness.

I also found that in being forgiven and in not being the very best, I found it easier to overlook the inadequacies of others on the team.

So when it comes to the difficult work of struggling with the ethics of a new emerging issue that society has placed before us, Paul's got it right. There's always going to be a struggle in our ethical work but seek to find the balance.

On one hand, don't act so cock-sure of yourself when someone else involved in the discussion is not coming out in agreement with you on one subject – don't get arrogant. You're on the same team but they're in a different place. They're on the same team, playing for the same goal.

And who knows, just like you presently believe something different than what you believed (on a certain issue) 15 years ago, you might wake up and find yourself with a different view on this issue in another decade. We would be wise to be prepared to

ask ourselves if *we* currently might really be the so-called “weaker brother” in this ethical issue.

Likewise, in the face-to-face dealing with another person (who may be operating, in your opinion, with a less sophisticated ethical methodology than you), **exercise grace.** You don't have to be a chameleon and change your ethical view every time you walk into a different room full of people – but at least be sensitive to *their* fears and their struggles. If you believe that someone else is genuinely struggling with an issue, in a pious and earnest attempt to seek the truth, be sensitive to where they are. They really don't have to know everything you know and end up expressing the same opinion as you. Let them disagree but if they approach you, hoping to gain insight, gently share it. Remember, don't start teaching your class unless you know they've signed up for class.¹³

And if they haven't signed up for class, remember that change doesn't come through argument. Change only comes *from within a relationship* where everyone knows they're on the same team and we're all in this together. Change comes only when everyone on the team feels safe enough to take the risk of struggling with something new. Change will be embraced only when we can actually take the risk of letting go of a long-held belief and actually consider looking at things in a new and different way. Test that out as you think through all of the changes the Christian church has made through the centuries – especially in our lifetimes.

This is the good news of the gospel. God has bought our contract because God knows our abilities. We have been placed in life on the varsity team of morality. We are accepted on the team and there is no substitute for us. We're not the best and we're not the worst but we do have tremendous worth to the team.

Therefore, play the game of life because you're freed up from being self-conscious. You're free to be conscious of others on the team. The only time you'll ever find yourself benched and out of the game is when you bench yourself. You take yourself out of the

¹³ Or, don't try to teach someone something unless they are truly open to learning and sincerely want to learn something different than what they're used to. Learning involves giving something up in order to take on something new. Most people are reluctant to give anything up.

play of life by being too arrogant or insisting that you're not good enough. So play ball, stay in shape and enjoy the game. ■

