

## **LESSONS FROM CORINTHIANS**

### **1 Corinthians 8:1-13; 10:23-33**

In some of the early chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul dealt with divisions in the church that came about because of personalities—spiritual leaders that had led and ministered in the church there. In an attempt to end the divisions, Paul gave a great perspective on how pastors and spiritual leaders should be viewed.

#### **Other Divisions**

When we come to Chapter 8, Paul addresses divisions in the body that center around gray areas in Christian living. What do I mean by “gray” areas? We all know that Scripture can make it very clear what is moral, immoral and sinful. Rarely are we able to say, “I wanted to obey God, but I just didn’t have enough information.” Most of the time we cannot play the ignorance card.

#### **Disputable Matters**

But having said that, there are areas in Christian living that are not black and white. You can call them gray areas, disputables [meaning there are possibilities of more than one opinion that can result in disputes and disagreements], nonessentials, conscience differences, etc. Regardless of what they are called, the Bible does not provide a definitive word on these matters—meaning they are neither right or wrong. But, any of the issues in this “gray” category can cause division among believers and disunity in the church.

Wherever Paul addresses the “gray” matters, he never uses the words “right” and “wrong.” Rather he talks about being careful in exercising Christian freedom, talks about being sensitive to your Christian brother, cautions against wounding a person with a weak conscience, warns about causing someone to stumble and exhorts the believer to do what brings glory to God.

In the Corinthian letter, Paul introduces the discussion of gray areas or disputables with the example of food offered to idols. A twenty-first century Christian immediately thinks—“meat offered to idols is not on my top-100 list of dilemmas.” Of course it isn’t. But that was the context of the first century Corinthian believers. Our context differs. We have different dilemmas. We have different gray areas. I will tell what is on your radar and what can bring about a division between Christians and believers within a church.

Drinking alcohol in moderation

Smoking

Sunday activities

Buying lottery tickets

Dancing

Playing Cards

Yoga exercise [involves the exercise of the body and mind] and meditation —what are the boundaries between Christian meditation and secular meditation found with Hinduism and Buddhism?

Reading Harry Potter books

Cremation

Some of these examples are true gray areas. I could add to that list movies, the Easter Bunny, the Masons, how to deal with Halloween, etc. You can get a good fuss going on any of these matters. A church can be polarized over many of these issues and relationships between people can be jeopardized. I think that the situation is made more complicated in the church where there is the mixing of cultures and generations. On one side you have a person saying doing a particular thing is wrong and on the other side a person saying, “You have got to be kidding me. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Get over it.”

Our focus is not Paul’s example in the Corinthian context, but the principles that Paul shares concerning gray areas—things that are neither right or wrong. The example is meat offered to idols. That is totally off our radar screen as an issue. But we should understand the example so we can understand

Paul's instruction about it. In the pagan worship at a place like Corinth, food was offered to the idols. If the offering involved meat, some of the meat was given to the idol, some of it was eaten and often the best part went to the meat market next door to be sold. Obviously, there were those who had been converted out of that background and were in the church at Corinth. Some of them saw the meat as neutral—meat is meat—and would buy it, eat it and serve it when they had guests for dinner. Others had a hard time grilling steaks that can come from the pagan temple. It was too closely connected to their sinful past. This is seen in the text.

***So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.***

***But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do [1 Corinthians 8:4-8].***

There we get a flavor of the dilemma over something that is not right or wrong, but involves different opinions on the same matter. So, what would happen if these two people with those different opinions got together in a social environment?

To help us understand that situation, let's take a situation more relevant for us. You have a couple over to your house and, because you are accustomed to having a glass of wine with dinner, you offer the same to your guest who does not drink wine. For you guest, drinking wine is wrong. You maintain that there is nothing wrong with it. One says “For me that is sin.” The other says, “It is not sin. You are just narrow-minded. There is nothing wrong with this. The Bible tells us that Jesus made wine. And besides what I do in my house is my business.”

From there you can only imagine what breaks out in the church around that encounter as both share their versions of what happened. That is why Paul is addressing the gray areas. These types of things cause rifts in the fellowship of the church and between believers.

So, maybe we need to pay close attention to what Paul taught the church at Corinth. The principles he laid out provide instruction for us.

Paul's key teaching on gray matters is this: there are issues that we face that are morally neutral; there is no spiritual advantage in doing them and or not doing them; doing them or not doing does not move you closer or more distant to God; the concern should be for one's fellow Christian brother and God's glory.

### **The Parties in Disputable Matters**

In this passage and others like it, Paul speaks of the Christian brothers who disagree over a gray matter as having either a strong conscience or a weak conscience. What does that mean? This language does not mean a strong person spiritually and a weak person spiritually. The issue is the “conscience.” The person with the strong conscience believes that the Bible does not prohibit an action or call it wrong, so he is free to do it. The person with the weak conscience does not feel free to do what his brother feels free to do. There are actually two types of people with weak consciences:

1. One believes that, even though the Bible does not prohibit an action, he does not have the freedom to do it. For him, it seems wrong. It feels wrong in his conscience, so it is like sin if he does it. His inner thoughts accuse him. This person is not one who might be offended by what the person with a stronger conscience does, but if he were to imitate and follow the stronger conscience believer, it actually would be detrimental to him or at least make him feel guilty. What causes this kind of weak conscience? It may be his background, his culture, how he grew up, influences in his life, things he experienced or witnessed, etc.

2. One says that because he thinks it is wrong, it is wrong for everyone. This person becomes the legalist. He makes his way of living and opinion normative for everyone else. He makes others prisoners of his expectations. He is a whistle blower on everyone's lifestyle.

Now, in situations when people differ over a gray area, what guidelines does Paul lay down?

### **The Guidelines to Follow**

Paul always puts the responsibility on the person with the strong conscience to act in love and for the good of others. He should admit that this area is a gray matter and do what is best for his brother. If the person with the strong conscience chooses to stand on his knowledge alone—i.e., there is nothing biblically wrong with what I am doing—he is more likely to become defiant and defensive. He will have the tendency to look down on those who think he is doing what is wrong. He is more likely to stress his freedom, even at the expense of others. But Paul reminds us that true Christian knowledge is inseparable from agape love. Agape love is sacrificing, self-giving and focused on others. As believers we do not just simply live by the rules but by the character of God. When we insist on our way, regardless of how it might affect our brother, it is idolatry.

How should the one with the strong conscience respond to the person with the weaker conscience? It depends on the type of weak conscience.

1. If it is the person with the sensitive conscience who feels that what the person with the strong conscience was doing was not wrong but was not something he could do himself—and if he followed the example of the one with the strong conscience would feel as if he were sinning--Paul told the person with the strong conscience to voluntarily curb his exercise of freedom. He would not be acting responsibly nor lovingly toward his brother to demand his freedom to the detriment of another. In this case, he does not limit his freedom to please the person, but to please God.
2. If he were dealing with the person with the weak conscience who was a legalist, what should he do? Does he have to live his life catering to the whim of the legalist? Jesus is a good example here. He avoided evil, but did not avoid doing what everyone called evil. He picked grain on the Sabbath. He healed on the Sabbath. He associated with sinners. The Pharisees called him a law breaker and a friend of sinners. But Jesus did not stop doing those things.

To further help us with our response, I think it is good to look at the conditions under which a person with a strong conscience should not exercise his freedom in a morally neutral act.

1. When it leads another to sin.

***Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak [1 Corinthians 8:9].***

***Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall [1 Corinthians 8:13].***

***Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God [1 Corinthians 10:32].***

2. When one can be destroyed by what I do.

***So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge [1 Corinthians 8:11].***

This is strong language. It is not just offending or disappointing a person with a weak conscience but destroying him. His Christian life is stunted.

3. When it would be tantamount to sinning against Christ.

***When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ [1 Corinthians 8:12].***

### **The Results Desired**

As we deal with gray areas, disputable areas, what does Paul see as the desired outcome? The desired outcome should help guide us in making our decisions.

1. The good of others.

***“Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others” [1 Corinthians 10:24]***

2. The glory of God.

***So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God [1 Corinthians 10:31].***

There will always be gray areas that produce differences of opinion and conviction. In the midst of those Paul told the church at Corinth to maintain fellowship and not create divisions. He never asked them all to agree. Our problem is that we can't fellowship with people with whom we don't agree. That is ridiculous. You don't even agree with your wife/husband and children on everything. But you remain married and a family. Paul said that the church must learn how to maintain fellowship when facing gray areas or disputables and he gave us the guidelines for doing so.

I would say that this matter not only affects relationships between Christian brothers and the fellowship of the church, but also evangelism and salt and light living. What good is it to act on our freedom even when we are not in the wrong if we harm the fellowship and jeopardize our opportunities to be a witness? Missionaries in other cultures have to deal with the latter part of this all the time. A missionary could flaunt their freedom in a particular culture and jeopardize their ministry and ability to reach those they went to reach. That doesn't make sense. That is not the law of love. There are cultures where make-up and jewelry are frowned on. In some parts of Africa a preacher is expected to be in a white shirt and tie even when it is sweltering.

As we conclude, let me do 2 things. First, let me apply a very relevant gray area to our church. Secondly, let me say a word about how to deal with gray matters as it relates to raising children.

1. First of all, let's talk about drinking alcohol. What does the Bible teach? The Bible speaks of drinking in moderation and warns against excess. There were Nazirites in scripture who abstained from drinking alcohol [John, Luke 1:15], but other than that, it is not prohibited. However, this is an area where we find strong and weak consciences existing. For me, personally, I have not and do not consume alcohol. I do not condemn those who do this responsibly. I made my choice for a number of reasons. First, I wanted to protect my children from what could have been for them a danger. Secondly, I have always tried to be careful with my witness as a pastor, setting the proper example before your children and as a pastor of this congregation [I know that your children see me as more than human]. Thirdly, I had family members who were alcoholics and saw what it did to their lives. Lastly, I have seen the harm it has caused in countless numbers of lives in my ministry. Not drinking is my statement against the rampant abuse of drinking that we see in our society. Yet, I realize that this is a disputable. That is what I have chosen to do. If I were to drink a glass of wine, it would not be sinful. It would cut across the reasons I have for abstaining and would be a pain to my conscience. Hence, I have a weak conscience in this area. I have a strong conscience in other areas.
2. How do we handle this gray area as a church? We do not use wine with communion. We do not do that because it is wrong but because we want this to be a safe haven for a recovering alcoholic. We also have an expectation that our pastors, elders and deacons abstain from the use of alcohol. The reason for that is with the mix that we have in this congregation of strong and weak consciences, we certainly would violate some of the guidelines that Paul gave. Therefore, it is incumbent on those with stronger consciences to defer to those with weaker ones. If you choose to serve in those areas mentioned above, you will take the spiritual high road of abstaining from something that you do not see as wrong for the good of your brother and disrupting to the fellowship of the church.

With gray matters, when it comes to raising children, parents should see and treat their children as their brothers and sisters. Make sure that you teach them truth regarding gray areas. If you have a

strong conscience in a matter, make sure that you do not cause your child to fall if they follow your example, even if you have the freedom to do something. Secondly, if you have a weak conscience on a matter, be careful that with the restrictions you place on your child that you do not sow the seeds of rebellion. I have seen this happen again and again.

The world is complicated. Let's not make it more complicated. Live by love. Be willing to live in this tension. And be willing to sacrifice your Christian freedom to edify your brother and win those to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Live to the glory of God.