

Loving the Weak
1 Corinthians 8:9

But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we know that there are many people who struggle with alcoholism. It is a disease and not simply a lack of will-power. Many alcoholics do try to stop, and some have been quite successful in avoiding alcohol using a variety of methods.

Should you know a person like this, would it make sense for you to invite this family member or friend to a party in which you will have beer, wine, and other alcohol readily available? You may have your one glass or bottle while you enjoy the company of those you invited. But are you being considerate of the person who struggles with alcohol if the alcohol is easy to take and most everyone around is drinking it?

How many times do you go to pagan temples and eat food that has been leftover from a sacrifice to a non-existent god? Most likely – none. Yet this was the situation in Corinth. Temples to various “gods” were everywhere in the city. The courtyards of these temples were popular meeting places, while worship and sacrifice took place in the inner areas. It would be in these courtyards that leftover sacrificed food would be prepared for a meal. Most the Gentile adults who were now Christian would have often frequented the courtyard. It was a place to catch up with someone you hadn’t seen in awhile or perhaps to make contacts with important people in town, which could help you later. And like today, many meetings occur with a meal.

Part of the issue at hand: is this permissible? Some Corinthians think so. As they have come to faith in Christ they have believed that there is only one God. Therefore, these pagan gods don’t really exist.

And Paul affirms that. “We know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’” As Paul is saying, anyone can make an image out of wood, stone, or clay of what

they think a god looks like, but that doesn't make that god real. Just because some, maybe many, think the god exists doesn't make it so. The Corinthians have correctly learned that there is only one God. Faith starts there. And the act of eating is not going to make other gods exist.

So, is it permissible for the Corinthian Christians to eat in these temple courtyards? Would it be permissible for a woman to wear a fancy bracelet that has one little symbol of another religion? It doesn't appear that anyone will forsake Christ. So to answer the question – yes, it could be allowed. The food is harmless. The bracelet is harmless.

But is it the right thing to do? This is the bigger question, and more important. It is important because it shows that the Christian life is more than a “me-and-God” relationship. Your Christian life is lived out in relationship to others, either as you personally interact with them or as you serve as an example of what the Christian life should be.

This is a tough road for the Christian to navigate. The words of Martin Luther are so true, which I paraphrase: “In Christ, we are perfectly free lords of all, subject to none. In Christ, we are also servants to all, subject to all.”

Our society and our inner nature like the first part. And to an extent there's nothing wrong with it. To not be free means that we have someone controlling our every move. We call that either dictatorship or abuse, depending on the situation.

But usually this way of living morphs into “I can do whatever I want to make myself happy and you can't tell me otherwise.” The sad thing is that a false god develops. It is the idea of unadulterated freedom and the happiness of the self. Bringing Luther in again, he reminds us that whatever we seek for pleasure and contentment is our god. No where is the real God here.

But I, or another pastor, can always have you examine your life to find those idols. We can and we do because it is so important to your faith not to have those other means of joy and

satisfaction dominate your life. Yet that's not what I want you to examine about your life today. Where are you failing to be a neighbor to the weak Christian or the potential Christian?

This is Paul's concern. Some Corinthian Christians revisiting these pagan temples were strong enough in their Christian faith to not really be tempted to go back to their old way of life. But not everyone is that strong. The weak Christian is not someone who doubts God's Word or existence but he is still figuring out how Christianity makes life different.

In my life I have known Christians who have gotten drunk or gambled a casino a few times or had a sexual relationship before marriage. None of the acts had anything to do with false worship, and none led me to think they were now condemned to hell. But it's easy to see how a weak Christian could think beer parties, trying to get more money, or sex are the key to life.

It is in our dealings with others that Jesus becomes so prominent. First, He always dealt with people where they were at in life. He didn't reject the apostles just because they were slow learners. And He didn't wait for people to show Him love before He taught or healed.

Second, He fulfilled the words of Isaiah the prophet, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench." Jesus came not for the strong, but the weak. And that is still our ministry.

Yes, every one of us needs Jesus going to the cross. In your personal sin against God and in failing to be a good Christian example to others you need the message of your sins forgiven that comes only because Jesus exchanged His perfect life for your sin. You need His death to fully remove every single sin from you so that God's anger will not burn against you.

Jesus fulfills His own words, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." Jesus should have come demanding worship and praise and offerings and complete obedience. In faith these are loving responses to Jesus. But He never

relied on His status as Son of God to do whatever He wanted or get from others what He wanted. He was a servant. He cared more for the sinner being forgiven and welcomed into heaven.

This truly is the knowledge that matters. Without it there can be no faith, and without faith there is no salvation for you. Because Jesus died in your place under the Father's wrath and rose from the dead you do not have to worry that too many stumbles will keep you out of heaven.

But again I go back to your Baptism, as I have done before this Epiphany season. Baptism has indeed brought you into Christ where there is forgiveness of sins, and salvation and eternal life where there is freedom from death and Satan. Baptism also prepares you for life in the world. Baptism binds you to others who are baptized into the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Living in love for your fellow Christian you may have to forego certain activities or refrain from being seen with certain people. You want to remove as many obstacles as you can to another's life with God. Yes, he/she needs more instruction in God's Word, but you can be an example. To family and friends you can live for showing others that being a Christian is special.

Through it all, being set apart from the world doesn't have to feel like a bad thing. If you believe you are strong in your Christian faith you know that God is hard at work in you. He has gifted you to serve others. By your words and actions you can affirm that life as a Christian is important now and wonderful for eternity. Amen.