

ADP9 - ASK PASTOR DON - Sunday, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020 - 6:30 p.m.

**“I’ve always been troubled by Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians about eating meat offered to idols. If it’s not a sin to eat meat for the more knowledgeable Christian and it is for the weaker, doesn’t this make the sin a relative issue?”**

This question was asked a number of times and I’ve combined the wording of a couple of questioners just to expedite the issue. Neither of the questioners gave the reference to the issue in Paul’s letters to the church at Corinth, so here it is.

**1 Corinthians 8:4-12 - “Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” [5] For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”— [6] 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. [7] However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. [8] Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. [9] But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. [10] For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? [11] And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. [12] Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.”**

My quick answer is no, I don’t think any of the sins pointed out in this passage is relative. By that I mean Paul seems to describe two different sins in this text and they are both ***actual, real guilt producing sins***. They are both the kind of sins that separate from God and need authentic forgiveness. They call for forgiveness in just the same way that sins like lying and stealing and committing adultery require forgiveness.

In fact, I’m not sure I know of any reference to relative sins in the Bible. I think whenever the Bible uses the term ***“sin”*** it has only actual, God-defying sins in view.

Before I start to unpack this involved text in **1 Corinthians 8** I’d like to pull in another passage dealing with the very same issue. It’s also from the Apostle Paul and helps shed light on the text we’re studying:

**Romans 14:13-15, 20-23 - “Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. [14] I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. [15] For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died....[20].... Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong**

for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. [21] It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. [22] The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. [23] But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”

I said a minute ago that the sin committed in the **1 Corinthians 8** passage was a real sin. And I would say the same thing about the **Romans 14** text we just read. There are no *“kind of”* sins in either text. The sins (and I want to show in a minute why there are a couple of *different* sins committed - plural) - the sins are real and they are *guilt-producing* before God.

Having said that, I don't want to be misunderstood. I believe there are two different sins committed in these texts, but neither sin is to be found in the meat itself. The meat - other items mentioned as well but the meat will suffice to make the point - the meat is only the *occasion* for the two sins. The meat is not the sin itself. Paul is quite clear eating the meat doesn't change either the eater or the non-eater.

This lines up with the teaching of Jesus Himself - **Matthew 15:10-11** - **“And he called the people to him and said to them, “Hear and understand: [11] it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.”**

But we need to be careful with the words we're studying from Paul. The meat isn't the *object* of the sins mentioned. But the meat is *involved* in the sin. The meat presents the *occasion* for the sins mentioned.

Here's what I see in these great texts from Paul:

- 1) ***There were mature, informed Christians who weren't at all superstitious about the meat they were eating.***

These Christians knew what Jesus said. What you put into your mouth isn't what makes or breaks a person spiritually. Food is food. Idols aren't real spiritual gods. The meat is unaffected by them. Don't ask about the meat you are served. Don't make an issue of it.

I get all of this from **1 Corinthians 8:4, 8** - **“Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.”....[8].... Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.”**

- 2) ***Many new Christians had just come out of religions that treated idols as powerful spiritual powers. They had renounced all of those idols when they were converted to Christ.***

You can imagine what a massive transition this was for them. Paul even mentions this abrupt conversion shift in many of them - **1 Thessalonians 1:8-9** - **“For not only has the word of the**

Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. [9] For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God....”

For these Christians there was no going back to anything from their past. They wanted nothing to do with idols. They had old friends and perhaps family members still tied up in the bondage of idolatrous false religions. Perhaps they were praying for their loved ones to be delivered. Perhaps they wanted to be safe examples for them to follow. All we know for sure is they were deeply troubled by the idea of eating meat offered to idols.

But so far no sin has been mentioned in our considerations. Both groups - the **stronger in knowledge** - who knew that meat, in itself, wasn't a spiritual issue - and the more **conscience tender weaker** - who still had enough baggage from the past to make eating idol-offered meat a compromise with a recent past - both groups are following Christ faithfully.

**And now we are in a position to see two specific sins unfold:**

- 3) **The more mature Christians thought their correct understanding by itself made it safe for them to eat the meat.**

They knew there was nothing objectively corrupt in the meat. They knew Christ had freed them from legalistic regulations. They knew their view was the **correct position** as far as the meat itself was concerned.

Yet with all of that going for them they proceeded with a very sinful course of action. **They pursued their own freedom in Christ without loving their less mature brothers and sisters in Christ.** They acted as though **it was enough** to understand the meat issue correctly. And it wasn't even **close** to enough.

So the mature Christians committed the first sin in these texts. Their's is the sin that starts the downward spiral - **1 Corinthians 8:12** - **“Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.”**

This idea is repeated in different words in **Romans 14:15, 20** - **“For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.....[20]....Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.”**

Wounding the weaker brother's conscience isn't a **sort of** sin. It is **“destroying the work of God”(Romans 14:20)**. This is a real, guilt-producing sin. And it's almost as though as the Holy Spirit inspires Paul He makes it very clear -removing any question whatsoever that this is a

serious sin. He can't wrap his point up without reminding all of us that this sin is a "***sin against Christ***"(1 Corinthians 8:12).

I don't know how to soften those words. They seem to silence any effort of ***relativizing*** this sin.

I said there were two sins committed in these passages. Here's the other:

- 3) ***Following the lead of the more mature, the weaker brother or sister ate the meat against the convicting voice of conscience.***

**1 Corinthians 8:10-13** - "For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, **will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?** [11] And so by your knowledge **this weak person is destroyed**, the brother for whom Christ died. [12] Thus, sinning against your brothers and **wounding their conscience** when it is weak, you sin against Christ. [13] Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I **make my brother stumble.**"

**Romans 14:23** - "But whoever has doubts **is condemned if he eats**, because the eating is not from faith. For **whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.**"

At this point we need to do some deep thinking about this text. The confusing part to many is the simple fact that the weaker brother doesn't really seem to be doing anything all that bad. Sure, he probably feels a bit disturbed by following the stronger brother in eating the meat, but it's still just eating meat. And Paul seems to already have said the meat was fine to eat. So where's the sin?

But the words of the text won't let the issue go that simply. Especially in the **1 Corinthians 8** text there is no avoiding those chilling words - "***...by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed***"(11).

***"Destroyed!"*** That's not a light word. Why did the Spirit of God lead Paul to use it? And how can eating innocent meat do this? Those are the questions we need to answer as we wrap up.

I think the best explanation for that heavy "***destroyed***" word in **1 Corinthians 8** is found in the last verse of **Romans 14** - **Romans 14:23** - "But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For **whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.**"

Here's what happens. This weak brother or sister, emboldened by the loveless actions of the more mature, eats the meat ***even though he has to push past the strong warnings of his own conscience.***

"Yes, but Pastor Don, it's just eating innocent meat." Yes. That's true - ***this time***. But the

loveless example of the strong has helped create what can grow into a pattern. There will be plenty of other time, to be sure, when questionable moral issues will arise. The stronger Christian may not be around to offer help or advice. The weaker Christian will have to rely on the inner guidance of his or her God-given conscience.

But this weaker Christian has already been encouraged - by stronger Christians - to act **against** conscience. He's become more practiced at **not** listening to the inward voice of God. He's been training to commit additional sins in the future.

No wonder Paul says this weaker Christian as already been "**destroyed.**"

So there are two lessons to take into our hearts. **First, it is never enough to be correct. We must all lovingly be safe to follow. It's a real sin to use my freedom in Christ to mislead weaker followers.** And **second, never go against the inner voice of conscience.** True enough, there may come a time when additional understanding will change my inner witness. But until that happens - until you can act with the peace of God ruling your heart - always act in good faith.