

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress**

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

#### **Glorify God...Love People**

(1 Corinthians 10)

Study #13

#### **Introduction: Wisdom for the day...**

Life is filled with some very clear-cut, right-or-wrong issues. There are laws, business policies, and relational “do’s and don’ts” that we dare not violate. But there are lots of more nuanced, “*It depends...*” issues.

This combination of cut-and-dried AND nuanced issues is as true for our life with Jesus as it is with rules of the road.

Two Sundays ago, we listened as the Apostle Paul described a pressing issue in the first-century church in the city of Corinth. It was one of those “*It depends...*” issues.

Christians in Corinth wondered, “*Should a Christian eat meat that had been sacrificed to a pagan idol?*”

There is no “*Thus saith the Lord*” in the Bible that covers that question. A Christian could come up with good reasons to not eat that meat and good reasons to go ahead and eat.

Paul wrote that it was up to each Christian to weight the pros and cons, decide what was right for him, for her, and follow their conscience. A given Christian could eat or not eat and be doing the right thing before God.<sup>1</sup>

That’s true about a lot of issues in life.

I thought about suggesting some 2025 issues that could be modern parallels to the Corinthian issue. But all of the issues I could think of were so incendiary that I decided to not even mention them.

- Should a Christian observe Halloween? If so, how?
- Are there guidelines to what music a Christian should listen to?
- Should a Christian affiliate with a political party? If so, which one?

To avoid making anybody feel uncomfortable, I decided I wouldn’t even mention these or other issues.

But we face these kinds of things all the time. We do so as individuals, as families, and as a church. So, we’re going to pay close attention to what Paul says about this important theme today.

We need the wisdom Paul supplies to help us disagree without dividing, to accept each other’s opinions while holding to our own, and to love each other and to serve Jesus together, despite differences.

As Paul laid out the “*eating meat*” issue, he said that a big part of the reason for Christians coming to different conclusions was that some have weak and some Christians have strong consciences.

Very often, a strong-conscience Christian will feel that he has freedom to act boldly and with great liberty while a weak-conscience Christian will feel constrained to not act at all freely.

For the one with a weaker conscience, this will either lead to a confining legalism (and they may become a Pharisee) OR to great contentment in living within the confines of his conscience.

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<sup>1</sup> As Paul wrote to the church in Rome about a similar issue, [*Romans 14:5*] *Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.*

For the one with a stronger conscience, this may lead to a lack of sensitivity to the weaknesses of others that will do damage OR to a full enjoyment of godly freedom within the bounds of love.

Paul would say to the weak and to the strong, *“Whether or not you eat meat sacrificed to idols or not depends on variables like, ‘What does your conscience allow?’ and ‘How will eating impact the person you’re with?’”*

It’s tricky. And life in Jesus introduces us to a tension that we have to learn to live with. We often don’t know where to draw lines.

We say, *“Love is the goal.”* We’re agreed on that.

But that end goal of love can be blurry and hazy. A thoughtful Christian will wonder, *“Does ‘It depends...’ apply to THIS issue?’ Or is THIS issue one of those and clear-cut matters of right-or-wrong?”*

It can be very difficult to know in some cases.

So, today, Paul starts off by doing us a favor. He identifies some things that are cut and dried and some lines that are not to be crossed.

In the first part of this morning’s passage, Paul uses the experiences of Old Testament Israel to INSTRUCT and to WARN us.

The references to Israel here are all taken from one generation’s worth of history - the generation that left Egyptian bondage and wandered around in the wilderness for forty years.

In the verses right before this passage, Paul acknowledged that there was a danger that he - or any of us! - might suffer loss of reward. (9:24-27) Or, to use his word, we might be *“disqualified.”*

Here, he describes Old Testament saints who were *“disqualified.”*

## **The Lessons We can Learn From Israel (10:1-13)**

### **God Richly Provided for the Israelites in the Desert (10:1-4)**

*We’re linked together with them (v. 1a)*

***[1] For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our fathers...***

Paul uses family lingo here to address his readers, who are Christians. And, writing to Jews and Gentiles in the Corinthian church, he called ancient Jewish ancestors *“our fathers.”*

There are distinctions, to be sure, between the people of God in different eras.

But, in that we are saved by grace through faith in either a coming Messiah (Old Testament) or the Messiah who has come (New Testament), there is a link between us and the Old Testament Jewish believers.

Paul listed a few of the amazing experiences *“our fathers”* had while they were in the wilderness for forty years.

***[1] For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our fathers were all under the cloud and they all passed through the sea; [2] and they were all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; [3] and they all ate the same spiritual food, [4] and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.***

By way of the pillar of cloud and fire, the Israelites experienced God’s guidance out of Egypt, to the Red Sea and beyond for forty years of wilderness wanderings.<sup>2</sup>

the Red Sea, the cloud continued to lead them and guide them for forty years. Wherever and whenever the cloud moved, they followed.

<sup>2</sup> The pillar protected the Israelites from the Egyptians who were pursuing them. By night it was a pillar of fire that kept them warm; by day it was a pillar of cloud to guide them and protect them from the heat of the sun. After they crossed through

They all passed through the dried up Red Sea. They all saw and experienced God's deliverance.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the entire forty years they benefited from the godly leadership Moses provided as he himself followed the Lord.

After their deliverance, Israel experienced God's on-going provision and sustenance. They ate manna for forty years.<sup>4</sup> On more than one occasion, God gave them water<sup>5</sup> from rocks in the wilderness.<sup>6</sup>

No question. God richly bless the people of that generation. But even though God richly blessed them, when they sinned greatly, they were greatly disciplined.

### The Fate of the Israelites Can Warn Us (10:5-6)

***[5] Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased; for their dead bodies were spread out in the wilderness.***

Talk about understatement. "**Most**" doesn't refer to 70 or 80%. That "**most of them**" who displeased God was about 99.99999%.

Out of what might have been a couple million Jews in the wilderness, the only adults to enter the land of Palestine were Caleb and Joshua. To use the language of 1 Corinthians 9, they were the only ones who "**won the prize.**"

That Jewish generation served as examples of redeemed people who were "**disqualified.**" They didn't enter the Promised Land.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> By the term "baptism" Paul means for us to understand that the Israelites were all "immersed" into Moses' leadership.

<sup>4</sup> Every morning (except on the Sabbath day) they would gather the manna. Every day was another miraculous provision. The preservation of their lives over the course of forty years was no less miraculous than their deliverance from Egypt through the Red Sea had been. That is why Paul calls it "**spiritual food**" here. It was true, physical food, but it brought a spiritual message. Every time the Jews ate it, they were to remember that it was God who had given it to them.

<sup>5</sup> God's provision of the water from rocks occurred near the beginning and near the end of the Israelites' wanderings. We know that a Jewish teaching developed that a

***[6] Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things, as they indeed craved them.***

All that happened to them applies to us because...if the Jews didn't enter the Promised Land because of their disobedience, then Corinthians - or San Antonians - who disobey will not receive the reward of reigning with Jesus in glory, hearing "*Well done!*" on the other side, or enjoying the abundant life here and now.

Paul went on to list some of the ways in which the Israelites failed and were punished in the wilderness.

### Israel's Tragic Failure Can Instruct Us (10:7-11)

*Don't do what they did! (vv. 7-10)*

***[7] Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, "THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND TO DRINK, AND ROSE UP TO PLAY." [8] Nor are we to commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. [9] Nor are we to put the Lord to the test, as some of them did, and were killed by the snakes. [10] Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were killed by the destroyer.***<sup>8</sup>

well of water followed God's people during their travels in the desert, but that is not taught in the Old Testament. Here, though, Paul identifies the source of the water as Christ, which dovetails perfectly with Jesus' claim to be the source of "**living water.**" (See John 4 and the story of the Samaritan woman.)

<sup>6</sup> Once, God turned bitter water into sweet water (Exodus 15:22-25). But on two other occasions, He actually caused water to pour out of solid rock. For this reason, it is called "**spiritual drink.**"

<sup>7</sup> See also Hebrews 3:18-19 for the same thought.

<sup>8</sup> The destroyer was the angel of God (Exodus 12:23), whom Paul indicates was sent to bring the plague spoken of in Numbers 14:37.

Idolatry,<sup>9</sup> sexual immorality,<sup>10</sup> testing the Lord,<sup>11</sup> and grumbling<sup>12</sup> displeased the LORD so much that He ordered Jews to kill fellow Jews who sinned, sent poisonous snakes against them, and consigned an entire generation to die in the wilderness and to not enter the promised land of Canaan.

Many of us have told our children that there are two ways to learn things in life: the smart way or the hard way. (Many of us know this because we've often learned the hard way...)

The smart way to learn, as Paul says here, is by learning through the mistakes of others.

*Do learn from their negative example (v. 11)*

***[11] Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.***

So, for us...

...worshiping anything other than God is always sinful.  
 ...sexual intimacy outside of the bonds of marriage between a husband and a wife is always sinful.  
 ...testing God by calling into question His wisdom or His goodness is always sinful.  
 ...rejecting God's gracious gifts is always sinful.

So, we say, *"Thanks, Paul. Very helpful. In no situation when these issues are at stake, does "It depends..." apply. Cut and dried."*

But...we might face temptation to sin in any of these ways. What do we do then?

It's a challenge to resist sin in the moment of temptation. So, Paul has advice for us who want to stand strong when temptation to sin hits.

### **The Takeaway Lesson from the Ancient Israelites (10:12-13)**

*Be on your guard against falling (v. 12)*

***[12] Therefore let the one who thinks he stands watch out that he does not fall.***

First, know this. Standing strong against temptation is a very good thing. It's great to resist temptation.

And if you're standing strong against temptation, great. And don't let your guard down. Stay alert because current standing is no guarantee against future falling.

Second, know this.

*Your temptations and trials are not unique (v. 13a)*

***[13a] No temptation has overtaken you except something common to mankind.***

Yes, it is true that you and I live in an age with unprecedented technology and opportunities. No, it is not true that we are facing unique temptations.

At some level, every temptation you and I face today has been faced - successfully - by Christians who have gone before us.

<sup>9</sup> While Moses was receiving the Law from God on Mount Sinai, the Israelites, down below, worshiped a golden calf that Aaron made for them down. (Exodus 32)

<sup>10</sup> The Israelites acted immorally with the people of Moab, who were directed by the false prophet, Balaam, to seduce the Jews in this manner to lead them away from the LORD. (Numbers 25)

<sup>11</sup> Paul points to a point late in the wilderness wanderings when the Israelites told Moses that they wished he had left them in Egypt, as slaves. (Numbers 21)

<sup>12</sup> A consequential rejection of God's offer of the Promised Land was rejected by ten of the twelve spies sent by Moses to report back what the land was like. Then, the whole nation rejected God's gift and were consigned to die in the wilderness. The rebels' children would inherit the Promised Land. (Numbers 14)

Temptation to sin boils down to a few core issues: idolatry, immorality, doubting and testing the Lord, grumbling about God's dealing in our lives - maybe a few others.

It's helpful to know that others have successfully navigated by God's grace the same kinds of temptations that threaten to undo us.

Third, know that you will never experience a time when God allows you to be over-tempted.

*God is faithful and good (v. 31b)*

***[13b]...God is faithful, so He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.***

The sinfulness of sin consists in this: It tempts us to doubt the faithfulness and the goodness of God.<sup>13</sup>

Paul wants us to know, in the moment of temptation, that the temptation is not God's doing and that, in that moment, He is going to offer us a way out.

God knows our weaknesses. He knows that we all have a breaking point, and He knows what that breaking point where we can't stand any more temptation is.

When the temptation reaches the boiling point, He promises that He won't leave us stranded. He will provide a way for us to walk through or around the temptation. Sin will never be inevitable.

When we are tempted, God will help us. We may well have to look hard for the escape hatch. But if we seek, we will find.

Temptation and escape routes always travel in pairs.

<sup>13</sup> But see James 1:12-18.

<sup>14</sup> Here, the Greek word is *φρονιμος* = sensible. Not the typical word for "wise" (*sophia*)

A Christian will never face temptation without receiving the means to a righteous response.

So, Paul has shown that there are some things in life that are right or wrong no matter what the extenuating circumstances might be. He now applies that truth to the Corinthian's meat-eating issue.

Listen to him paint a picture of a meal, a meal that has been enjoyed by believers in Jesus through the ages and around the world.

### **Lines NOT To Be Crossed (10:14-22)**

#### **Holy Meals for the People of God (10:14-18)**

*The holy worship at the Lord's Supper (vv. 14-17)*

***[10:14] Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. [15] I speak as to wise<sup>14</sup> people; you then, judge what I say. [16] Is the cup of blessing<sup>15</sup> which we bless not a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is the bread which we break not a sharing in the body of Christ? [17] Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.***

Every month, on the first Sunday of the month, we take the Lord's Supper together here.

We don't eat a full meal as it seems was often the case in the early church. But we take a tiny piece of bread and a little bit of drink. We sing a song together. We hear the words of Jesus, "This is My body. Take. Eat. This is My blood. Drink. Remember Me."

And we do. It's a holy moment where all of us take time to reflect on what Jesus has done for us. It's a beautiful meal.

Then, here's a picture of another meal, observed by the people of Israel.

<sup>15</sup> This is a reference to the third cup in the Passover feast and may well have been the cup with which our Lord instituted the sacrament of Communion.

*The holy meals of the Jews (v. 18)*

***[18] Look at the people of Israel; are those who eat the sacrifices not partners in the altar?<sup>16</sup>***

For thirty-five hundred years, Jews have celebrated Passover.

Families gather to eat the Seder meal of lamb, bitter herbs, sweet charoset, and unleavened bread.

During the meal, the Jews remember God's grace in their story, and especially of the miraculous deliverance from Egyptian slavery, then through the Red Sea into the freedom on the other side.

It's another beautiful, holy meal. But Paul continued and described another, not-so-beautiful, meal.

### **Unholy Meals to Refuse (10:19-22)**

***[19] What do I mean then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? [20] No, but I say that things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become partners with demons. [21] You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. [22] Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than He, are we?***

Earlier, Paul said that there was no such thing as an idol. There was no life in the image before which a pagan worshipper bows down. (1 Corinthians 8:4)

True. But something was going on when an idol was worshipped. Paul said that something was demonic.

No one can treat idol worship as "safe" just because the wood or stone or metal image is nothing. Demons are behind the worship of idols. Idolatry is the worship of demons.

A Christian accepts the idea that Jesus is the object of worship when he takes the bread and the cup; that the sharing of the communion elements is a sharing in the life of Christ.

And that Christian would also have to accept the idea that to go to a pagan temple and eat a meal in the presence of an idol would be to share in the life of demons and to practice idolatry.

Therefore, even though idols are nothing (8:4-6), a Christian is banned from eating a sacrificial meal at an idol's temple.

There is nothing "grey" about that. It's cut and dried. Here's clarity. Eating food sacrificed to idols in some settings is a matter of conscience. It's in the grey zone.

But eating that meat in an idol's temple or in the presence of an idol image is explicitly against the will of God. It's sinful. Out of bounds.

But, again, as we have seen, some things are not quite so cut and dried.

Paul next returned to the issue of purchasing discounted meat in the Corinthian meat market that had been sacrificed to an idol.

Should a Corinthian Christian buy it, or not?

### **Decision-Making in the Grey Zone, Part 2 (10:23-30)**

#### **Don't Be Over Scrupulous (10:23-26)**

***[23] All things are permitted, but not all things are of benefit.<sup>17</sup> All things are permitted, but not all things build people up.***

<sup>16</sup> In the Jewish system, those who ate of the sacrifices were "*partakers*." Those receiving the sacrificial food enter into fellowship with all that the altar stands for.

<sup>17</sup> A repeat of 6:12

**[24] No one is to seek his own advantage, but rather that of his neighbor. [25] Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions, for the sake of conscience; [26] FOR THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, AND ALL IT CONTAINS.**

To the question, "Should I buy meat in the market, if the meat had been offered to an idol?" Paul answered, "Sure. Go for it."

It was sinful to attend feasts held for idols in idol's temples. But simply buying sacrificed meat in the market was not necessarily sinful.

Paul writes that there's no point in being over-scrupulous about it. One Bible scholar renders this verse, "Don't ask fussy questions for conscience's sake."

Instead, walk into the meat market with confidence. Look for the best bargain you can find. Remember that everything belongs to the Lord (as quoted above, from Psalm 24:1) - and buy the meat.

Then Paul deals with another scenario. What should you say if Chris Corinthian, an unbeliever, invites, you, a Christian, over for dinner?

As Paul answers this question, we begin to understand a bit better the working of the apostolic mind.

### **Don't Violate the Conscience of Another (10:27-30)**

*Guess who invited you to dinner? (v. 27)*

**[27] If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions, for the sake of conscience.**

Here, the meal in question is not being eaten in a pagan temple, but in a private home. The Christian is at perfect liberty to say, "Sure, I'd love to enjoy a meal with you at your place."

Not only that, but the Christian should feel free to eat whatever food is placed before him.

And, yes, Paul was aware that the meat the Christian was about to eat might have been grilled as an offering in the idols' temple.

Paul says, that's OK. Just don't ask your host, "By the way, this meat wasn't offered to an idol, was it?" Ignorance is bliss.

Then Paul throws a curve.

*Don't clean your plate! (v. 28a)*

**[28a] But if anyone says to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat it, for the sake of that one who informed you and for the sake of conscience.**

If the host volunteers, "Oh, you should know, this meat has been sacrificed to idols" the Christian should push away from the table and NOT eat.

Why?

Because the host, entertaining a Christian, could end up thinking that the Christian who knowingly eats meat sacrificed to an idol is actually engaging in idol worship as he eats.

This would legitimize idolatry in the mind of the host. For that reason, the Christian who is informed by his host that the meat on the plate before him has been involved in idol worship should not eat it.

He is to refrain from eating "**for conscience's sake.**"

*The issue is conscience... (vv. 28b-30)*

**[28b]...do not eat it, for the sake of that one who informed you and for the sake of conscience; [29] Now by "conscience" I do not mean your own, but the other person's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? [30] If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered about that for which I give thanks?**

And for whose conscience's sake should he not eat? Not the Christian's conscience - because the Christian knows that an idol is nothing. His conscience is clear.

Paul was concerned for the conscience of the unbelieving host.

So, whether for the sake of a Christian brother or sister OR for the sake of someone who doesn't yet know Jesus, the strong believer bends over backward to keep the other person from stumbling.

Paul wraps up this whole section of 1 Corinthians (chapters 8-10) by giving us two bottom-lines for the times when we face a decision in "the grey zone."

### **Conclusion:**

**FIRST, [31] *Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all things for the glory of God.***

That term - "***for the glory of God***" - can be one of those terms that sounds good but is hard to explain. My understanding is that what glorifies God is what makes God look as good as He really is.

So, in everything we do - eating or drinking, observing holidays or not, having a meal with a friend, discussing politics, making a major purchase, driving on 1604 - whatever! - we are to do the thing, speak the words, that we think would make God look as good as He really is.

Whether hanging with believing friends or with unbelieving friends, glorify God.

Use your God-given creativity to envision which action will bring the most glory to God - and do THAT.

**SECOND, [32] *Do not offend Jews or Greeks or the church of God; [33] just as I also please everyone in all things, not seeking my own benefit, but the benefit of the many, so that they may be saved.***

Let's use the term to describe what Paul says here as living by the rule of "*spiritual expediency*."

Do whatever brings benefit, whatever builds another person up, whatever opens up a door for the gospel.

Bring love to the decision-making table, as Paul did when he said, **[1 Corinthians 8:13] *Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to sin.***

When making decisions where there is no clear-cut "*Thus saith the Lord...*," carry a ministry mindset.

It is possible that what you decide to do with regard to a certain behavior will impact a brother or a sister in Christ. It may even impact how someone understands the beauty of the gospel message.

Living by these two rules - maximizing the glory of God and maximizing blessings to others - will stand you in good stead in the decisions that you face.