

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Salt and Light

(Impacting our world for Jesus)

Leavening Our World

(Luke 13:20-21; passages in 1 Corinthians)

Study #2

Introduction: Bad and good leaven...

The Bible frequently makes mention of *leaven*, what we would call *yeast*. Sometimes, the reference is to literal leaven; often the reference is symbolic.

In the literal sense, the Jews would put a small piece of fully risen (leavened) bread in an unleavened lump of dough.

Then, over time, that leavened piece would infiltrate the dough, invisibly and unobserved, and cause it to rise, to ferment.¹

Leaven came to symbolize anything that infiltrated something else, and often in a bad way.

Jesus described the Pharisees' teaching as "*the leaven of hypocrisy*." (Luke 12:1) The Apostle Paul used leaven to describe the infiltration of evil into a church. (1 Corinthians 5:6)

But there are positive references to leaven in the Bible.

Leaven was allowed in some Old Testament sacrifices.² And there is at least one place in Scripture where leaven is referred to as a symbol of a **good** infiltrating force.

Luke recorded a parable Jesus gave about the kingdom of God that involved leaven. He said, ***[Luke 13:21] "[The kingdom of God] is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three sata of meal until it was all leavened."***³

Jesus was using the everyday work of leavening a lump of dough to positively picture the unobtrusive advance of God's kingdom as it infiltrated and permeated families and circles of friends and even whole societies.

The point of that parable and the point of today's time in the Bible is to highlight the impact we can have for Jesus as we lovingly leaven our world by expanding the scope of our friendships to people who don't yet believe in Jesus.

To explore that idea, we'll spend the bulk of our time today in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. We'll begin by listening as Paul warned those first-century Christians against certain kinds of relationships.

Delightfully Redemptive Friendships (1 Corinthians 5: 10)

Distinctively Expansive Friendships (1 Corinthians 5:9-13)

DE-friending a brother (1 Corinthians 5:9, 11, 13)

Misapplying Paul's previous letter's instruction

He reminded his readers of a previous letter he had written, a letter to which we no longer have access.⁴

¹ As the Jews were commanded to flee into the desert from Egyptian slavery, they were to leave in a hurry, to not even take time to leaven their bread. They just took the unleavened dough with them on their way out of Egypt.

² Leaven was allowed in peace offerings (Leviticus 7:13) and was required in the sacrifices during the Festival of Weeks / Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:17).

³ The parable is provocative. It speaks to growth of the kingdom through the ages. It speaks of the secret advance of the kingdom. In the same way that we can't see leaven at work, so we often can't see Jesus kingdom advancing.

⁴ Evidently this was a letter with which the Corinthians were all familiar.

In that lost letter, he had told the Corinthians that they shouldn't associate with ***"immoral people."*** (1 Corinthians 5:9)

Christians are called to holiness and purity. Paul said that Christians are even to draw lines that will separate them from those who are pursuing blatantly sinful lives.

So, the Corinthians did what Paul told them to do - but in exactly the opposite way he had intended.

They separated from unbelieving Corinthians who were engaged in sinful behavior - and that wasn't at all what Paul had in mind.

Paul's clear point

In our letter, he explained, ***[1 Corinthians 5:11] But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother⁵ if he is a sexually immoral person, or a greedy person, or an idolater, or is verbally abusive, or habitually drunk, or a swindler - not even to eat with such a person.***

The Corinthians thought that Paul was warning them against hanging with a rebellious outsider. Not at all. He was warning about the danger of hanging with a rebellious fellow-Christian.

Thinking in terms of leaven, Paul's point was that a rebellious Christian would be an unhealthy leavening influence in the church.

He told the Corinthians how to deal with sin in the church. Stop its infiltration. Clean out the leaven. (1 Corinthians 5:7)

That was exactly what Paul did with the brother who was caught up in an immoral relationship. Long distance, the Apostle Paul removed him from the church.⁶

But what are we to do with people who engage in sinful sorts of sinful behavior and who are not believers in Jesus?

BE-friending the outsider (1 Corinthians 5:10, 12)

[10] I did not at all mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the greedy and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to leave the world.

Freedom to be friends

Paul said that there was no problem with Christians having friendships with those who didn't believe in Jesus. In fact, He encouraged the Corinthians to ***"associate"*** with the unbelieving Corinthians, regardless of their lifestyle.⁷

His message? Don't let the lifestyle of someone who is an outsider to the faith be the wedge that separates you. Don't ***"leave the world."*** (v. 10)

Wisdom still applies

Now, before going on, I want to give a shout out to the way of wisdom.

In the book of Proverbs, Solomon repeatedly makes the case for the wisdom of choosing companions with care. Paul warns, ***"Bad company corrupts good morals."*** (1 Corinthians 15:33)

⁵ I believe that Paul's description of the brother here is better translated ***"named"*** than ***"so-called."*** The text does not even hint at the possibility that the man was not a Christian. As we have already seen, he is contrasted with the non-believers of Corinth (v. 2) and with those outside the church (v. 12) To be ***"named"*** something is NOT to say that the thing named is different than what it is named. It is to name it correctly.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 5:3-5.

⁷ That list of sins (v. 10) is interesting. But it was obviously only a *"for instance"* kind of list. The possibilities for sinfulness - by believers or by unbelievers - are way more numerous than what Paul mentions here.

Throughout the Bible, there are stories of the need to beware of associations with those who could tempt us to stumble into sin.

So, by cheering for Christians to pursue friendships with those outside the church, I am not suggesting that we throw wisdom to the wind.

We need to guard against giving children and youth exposure to things that are not age-appropriate. That is one of the main assignments God gives to parents.

And we should each be cautious in involving ourselves with people or activities where we may have a hard history.

But Paul would say, after applying wisdom, by all means, be friends with people who don't yet believe in Jesus.

By all means, be friends!

Paul was no fan of Christian monasticism. He wanted Christians to be in circulation. We are to be leavening infiltrators who are ***"salt and light"*** to our friends.

High on the list of why we here at Northwest have a Benevolence Fund and a Food Pantry is so that we can be "friendly" to people in our community who have material need.

A few years ago, we began to befriend Afghan families who came to San Antonio from Afghanistan. We are continuing to be friendly, to deepen relationships, and to provide necessities for two large Afghan families.

It was out of a heart to make friends and to meet needs in Jesus' Name that Jennifer Robison began our ESL ministry some years ago.

That's why we open our building to outside groups that meet throughout the week for all kinds of purposes.

Any of you may be leavening your world by...
 ...hanging out with friends after work and pouring the salt of the Gospel on hungry hearts, creating a thirst.
 ...viewing work time as opportunity time to serve the company AND to shine for Jesus.
 ...buddying up with classmates to study and letting your light shine.
 ...playing or coaching sports, joining a running group, forming a bridge club of a bunko club, or a kids play group or a mom's group or a dinner group to be leaven.

Paul didn't want Christians in Corinth, and he wouldn't want us to live in a bubble. That would be to commit the error of the Corinthian church.

Of course, it would be impossible for us ***"to go out of the world"*** in the absolute sense.

But, in Corinth in Paul's day and in San Antonio, today, it is possible that we might arrange our schedules so as to see as little of the unbelieving world as possible - and that would be wrong.

We have the gift that our friends most desperately need - the message that LIFE is found in a trusting relationship with Jesus. And we can most meaningfully give that gift when we lovingly leaven.

Paul continued to give guidance to the Corinthians, so we continue to listen. He has some more advice to give when it comes to being ***"salt and light."***

Radically Sensitive Friendships (1 Corinthians 10:23-30)

"Iffy items" ...in the church (1 Corinthians 10:23-26)

In our world, we live with some very clear-cut, right-or-wrong issues. There are laws and business policies that we dare not violate.

But there are also other, more nuanced, *"It's iffy..."* issues.

Paul addressed a pressing issue in the first-century Corinthian culture that impacted Christians there, one of those *"It's iffy..."* matters.

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

There was no “*Thus saith the Lord*” in the Bible that covered 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 weigh the pros and cons and follow their conscience. Any given Christian could eat or not eat and be doing the right thing before God.⁸

That’s true about a lot of issues in life. And we face these kinds of things all the time. We do so as individuals, as families, and as a church.⁹

It’s tricky. Life in Jesus introduces us to a tension that we have to learn to live with. We often have to wrestle with where to draw lines. There is a lot of grey out there.¹⁰

It can be tough to know in some cases. So here is helpful advice from Paul.

[1 Corinthians 10:23] All things are permitted, but not all things are of benefit. All things are permitted, but not all things build people up. [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.

⁸ Paul wrote to the church in Rome about a similar issue. His advice? ***[Romans 14:5] Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.***

⁹ Paul will say (in Romans 14) that a big part of the reason for Christians coming to different conclusions on “iffy” things was that some Christians have weak and some Christians have strong consciences. For the one with a weaker conscience, this will either lead to a confining legalism (leading to pharisaism) OR to great contentment in living within the confines of his conscience. 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.

So, to the question, “Should I buy meat in the market, if the meat had been offered to an idol?” Paul answered, “Sure. It is ‘**permissible**.’ Go for it.”¹¹

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.

But...don’t buy the meat if buying it is going to tear someone down. Don’t buy the meat if it is going to be harmful to your Christian “**neighbor**.”

Be sensitive to what is good for your fellow Christian when deciding on a course of action.

Then Paul addresses that “*eating meat sacrificed to idols*” issue, but in a completely different context. What he has to say here helps us understand the apostolic mind when it comes to our being evangelistic leaven.

“Iffy items”...outside the church (1 Corinthians 10:27-29a)

[1 Corinthians 10:27] 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. And it isn’t the home of a fellow church member. You’re eating with an unbelieving friend. How very friendly.

¹⁰ We say, “*Love is the goal*.” We’re agreed on that. But even that end goal of love can be blurry and hazy. A thoughtful Christian will wonder, “Does ‘It’s iffy...’ apply to *THIS* issue?’ Or is *THIS* issue one of those and clear-cut matters of right-or-wrong?”

¹¹ It was truly 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*.”

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, before the host bought the main course, the meat the Christian guest was about to eat might have been grilled as an offering in the idols’ temple.

Paul says that’s OK. Don’t even ask your host, *“By the way, this meat wasn’t offered to an idol, was it?”* Ignorance is bliss.

Then Paul throws a curve.

[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, and just so you know, this meat was sacrificed to idols”* - the Christian should push the plate away and NOT eat. And why?

Because the host, who was entertaining a Christian, probably told his Christian friend where the meat came from because he thought he was protecting the Christian from doing something the Christian would consider wrong.

After that announcement, if the Christian went ahead and ate that meat, the unbeliever would conclude that idolatry was perfectly fine and would be confirmed in his idolatry.

For that reason, when the host lets the Christian know the history of the ribeye in front of him, he should not eat it. He is to refrain from eating ***“for the sake of conscience.”***

[1 Corinthians 10:28b]...do not eat it, for the sake of that one who informed you and for the sake of conscience; [29a] Now by “conscience” I do not mean your own, but the other person’s.

Again, not for the sake of the conscience of the Christian, who knows that an idol is nothing.

It’s for the sake of the conscience of the unbelieving host.

In other words, in the same way that we are to be willing to bend over backwards to not offend our fellow Christian by the use of our liberty in Christ, so we are to do whatever we can to not violate the conscience of our unbelieving friend.

Paul calls us to recognize that it is likely that what you decide to do in this or that situation will impact how someone understands the beauty and the power of Jesus’ gospel.

Love for our unbelieving friend means that we practice extreme sensitivity to his or to her conscience.

We find a similar line of thinking one chapter earlier in 1 Corinthians. There, Paul wrote about his legitimate “rights” in life.

He explained why he chose to exercise his right to not make use of his rights.

Evangelistic Chameleon-ism (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

Paul, the Self-Enslaved Free Man (9:19)

[19] For though I am free from all people, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may gain more.

To be a free person in any society brings with it tremendous advantages. To be free in America (not incarcerated; a citizen) brings benefits. It was the same in the first century.

As a Roman citizen, Paul enjoyed lots of privileges in the public square. As an apostle, he deserved - and usually received - a lot of respect from the Christian community.

Paul was...

...the “*strong-conscience*” Christian who knew that he could eat anything he wanted to eat - meat sacrificed to pagan idols, kosher food, Gentile food - and it didn’t matter one bit to God.

...that guy who wasn’t shackled by fear about what other people thought of him. He was, truly, free to do what he wanted to do and to be what he wanted to be.

And...he was the man who refused that right to do what he knew he was free to do. On purpose, he chose slavery to the ways and weaknesses of others.¹²

Paul, the Relational Chameleon (9:20-23)

[20] To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might gain Jews; to those who are under the Law, I became as one under the Law, though not being under the Law myself, so that I might gain those who are under the Law.

Paul grew up as a strict, orthodox Jew. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. He became a Pharisee. Nobody was more Jewish than Paul.

Then, he became a Christian with a commission to take the good news of Jesus to non-Jews. He then learned to live as a Gentile.

[21] to those who are without the Law, I became as one as without the Law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might gain those who are without the Law.

But he never forgot what it was to be a Jew.

So, when he was with Jews, he reverted to enough Jewishness to make the Jews around him feel comfortable.¹³

¹² See the example of an Old Testament slave who loved his master. Rather than accept his freedom after six years of serving as a slave, this slave chose to remain his master’s slave. To seal the deal, the master would “*pierce*” that slave’s ear, turning him from a slave into a bond-slave, a voluntary slave for the rest of his life. (Exodus 21; Deuteronomy 15)

¹³ Note what Luke records in Acts 21. Paul had been having extraordinary success in reaching Gentiles on the Third Missionary Journey where he lived and worked

And when he hung with the Gentiles, he behaved and dressed and ate like a Gentile to better fit into Gentile culture.

Paul was a chameleon, a shape-shifter who made it his aim to fit into whichever group he was with. And his chameleon-ish ways extended beyond the religious world.

Paul was a strong person in personality and willpower, maybe even in physical strength. He accommodated himself to those who were “*weak*” by becoming weak, himself, when he was with people who were weak.

[22a] To the weak I became weak, that I might gain the weak...

We listen to Paul describe himself and can, I think in this case, compare Him to Jesus, who was famous for spending time with “*tax-collectors and sinners.*” (Matthew 11:19)

Those people were the least, the last, and the lost of first-century Jewish society. They might have been wealthy, but they were outcasts...and Jesus was their “Friend” even as He became the most influential Rabbi in Israel.

We can picture Jesus shaping his interactions when He was with these people in such a way that they wouldn’t be intimidated, wouldn’t feel inferior, and that they would sense that they were loved for being the image-of-God bearers they were?¹⁴

Paul took his cue from Jesus and did the same with the weak in his world: with the poor, the disenfranchised, the outcasts.

as if he was a Gentile. But when he returned to the city of Jerusalem, he took the advice of some local Jewish Christian leaders to put himself under the Law by taking a “vow,” (which required him to cut his hair, an outward sign of Jewishness) thereby putting himself in a better position to be listened to by the Jews there.

¹⁴ Isaiah, writing about the coming Messiah, said, ***[Isaiah 42:3] A bent reed He will not break off.*** (Quoted in Matthew 12:20)

His summary says it all. [22b]...*I have become all things to all people, so that I may by all means save some. [23] I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.*

If you look at the first half of 1 Corinthians 9, Paul made the case that as Jesus' apostle, he had all kinds of rights that he could use to his advantage.

He then went on to write that he had waived the right to eat and drink what he wanted to eat and drink. (9:4) He waived the right to marry. (9:5). He waived the right to be supported financially by those he served. (9:6-7)

He waived his right to free expression, making himself a slave to the ways and to the weaknesses of others.

Conclusion:

Paul's concluding thoughts answer the question, *"Why in the world would you do all of this?"*

And taken all that we've seen today, why would Paul...
 ...go out of his way to embrace meaningful friendships with people who had a different worldview, lifestyle, and faith than he did?
 ...be super sensitive to not violate the conscience of a friend who was far from God?
 ...refuse perfectly legitimate rights, when doing so made his life harder, brought him mockery and insult, and ruined his reputation?
 ...become a relational chameleon, relating to everyone he met on a footing that was best for them, whether it was best for him or not?

In saying that he gave up the right of free self-expression to better connect with **"all people"** he tells us repeatedly that it was **"so that I may by all means save"** (or **"gain"**) the Jew, the non-Jew, the one under Law, and the weak. (See vv. 12, 19, 20, 21, 22,)¹⁵

When you flex to adapt to a culture different from your own OR when you adapt your mood to match the mood of the person you're with OR when you give up your right to express yourself freely because of your love for the other person...you just might open a door to tell someone about your Jesus.

Paul's evangelistic strategy was intentional and diverse. He preached sermons to crowds (Acts 13 and 14) and he gave lectures in centers set apart for philosophers. (Acts 17 in Athens)

He also developed close relationships and shared Jesus person to person, friend to friend.

While we here at Northwest will sometimes have evangelistic outreaches, and we often seek to meet needs in our community in Jesus' Name, and I love to share the Good News on Sunday mornings, the key intentional Northwest strategy for evangelism is you, making friends.

If we're looking for reasons to imitate Paul's intensely relational style, here's one compelling reason: So that we'll be better positioned to tell the person we love the best news they'll ever hear and introduce them to Jesus.

The key takeaway from this morning's time in the Bible is that God honors us by assigning us to broaden our relational reach to include people who are far from Him.

At some point in the past, someone's reach included you. Now, you do the same for someone else.

¹⁵ In this extended passage (1 Corinthians 9) Paul listed two more reasons for waiving personal rights and for giving his life to the spread of the gospel. **ONE**, he wanted to become "a fellow partaker" of the gospel (v. 23) Paul's willingness to waive his rights is wrapped up in his deep longing to be identified with the truth

that sets people free, brings forgiveness of sin, establishes relationship with God, and gives eternal life: the gospel. **TWO**, he wanted to receive the **"imperishable"** reward Jesus longs to give to faithful servants. (vv. 24-27)