**Pastor Tim’s Message Notes 1-22-2023
To Eat Or Not To Eat – That Is the Question**

I remember back in high school we had to read a few works of Shakespeare in English class. Can any of you identify with me? Did you have a similar experience?

I recall reading at least a couple of Shakespeare’s plays - Julius Caesar and Romeo & Juliet. But perhaps Shakespeare’s most famous line came from his work Hamlet. Does anyone know it? It is, “To be or not to be, that is the question.”

And in that play Hamlet then goes into this long monologue, as he is pondering life and its importance.

But that line, “to be or not to be,” makes me think of all different circumstances. Should I do this or should I do that? Shall I go here or there?

Which path is the better one? What makes more sense? And what are the things that should be taken into account in making this decision?

Now if Shakespeare was writing a play about the church in Corinth, perhaps he would have written a famous monologue that begins, “To Eat or Not To Eat, that is the question.”

While the question may seem like a familiar one to ask in America today, it is typically for other reasons. Nowadays, the question is usually in regards to the better of the bulge and decisions over diet in relation to our physical health.

But in Corinth in the 1st century, that question was important for very different reasons. And it was actually such an important subject in Paul’s mind that he structured his letter in a way that this section of chapters 8-10 would highlight the literary center for his entire letter.

Because of this, it is vital for us to understand what Paul is getting at here and why it’s important. And then, in light of that, what are some of its implications for us today.

As we now prepare to hear from God’s Word, it is important to remember that this question of eating or not eating certain foods is very connected with the problem of idolatry that pervaded Corinth. Idolatry was the norm. It touched everything. It just saturated through all of their culture.

And this included food as well. Food is a big part of culture. Just think of the images that come to our minds when we say “Mexican food” or “Chinese food.”

In Corinth, the issue is that many of their foods, particularly various meats, became connected with idolatry in some way. For example, a large amount of the meats that were available for purchase in the marketplace had been presented before various idols as expressions of pagan worship.

The question, then, is should Christians abstain from eating these meats? Is it off limits? Would eating these things define them or not?

Let’s turn to the Scriptures and hear some of what Paul has to say in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13.

**1Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. 2Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. 3But whoever loves God is known by God.**

**4So 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.” 5For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), 6yet for us there is but 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.**

**7But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. 8But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.**

**9Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. 10For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? 11So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. 12When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 13Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.**

So what is going on here? What is Paul getting at? And what is the Holy Spirit teaching us through Paul?

There are a couple of things. First, Paul is clear that idols are nothing. They are blocks of stone or wood. They are not alive.

Consequently, just because a piece of meat was offered to feed an idol that is not alive does not mean that the meat is not bad to eat. The substance of the food is still the same and there is nothing in and of itself wrong to eat, whether it is chicken or steak or whatever.

Paul mentions in chapter 10, still in talking about this big subject, “Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.”

So, in one sense, Paul tells the Corinthian Christians that yes, you can eat. The food is fine to eat. No worries.

But that is not the full answer on this question. It is more complicated. Paul then goes on to describe that in some cases it is best not to eat these meats.

Why is this the case? It is because some of the believers there still believe that an idol is somehow alive and that it would be sinful and wrong for Christians to eat meat that has any connection to idol worship.

Paul explains that sometimes, if those weaker in the faith see them eating these things, they could become confused and even to stumble in their faith walk.

Do you see how this was a complicated question for Paul to answer?

So what is more important - the Christians’ freedom to eat what they want or is it the well-being of the sister or brother in Christ? Paul teaches that just because a Christian is free in Christ to eat this or that without guilt, Christians should not let the exercise of their freedom be something that damages the less mature believer in Christ.

In other words, there is something even more important than exercising one’s rights to be free in Christ. **It is walking in love towards one another.** It is thinking of the other and their well-being and doing their best to support their growth in Christ, rather than stifling it.

And not only this, Paul even states that when people knowingly focus on their own freedom rather than the well-being of others, they actually sin against Christ. Isn’t that something?

Paul gives another example when the question of “To eat or not to eat” should be answered with a clear NO! And this in the context of pagan festivals.

In a similar way that there were festivals in Jerusalem that the Jews rightly celebrated and worshipped Yahweh, there were pagan festivals regularly in Corinth to worship and honor this or that idol.

And the eating that happens at these festivals is very connected with worship. And Paul is saying that the Christians of Corinth are to abstain from taking part in these pagan practices. Even if they would say they would be attended just because they wanted a nice steak, they were still not to go.

And this is because even though the idols are lifeless, pagan worship does actually connect people in an unhealthy way with the demons that were spiritually behind the various idols.

So even though the meat would be fine to eat in the privacy of one’s own home or with more mature believers in the faith, the location and the practices connected to the actual eating would be important factors to determine if they were to eat or not to eat.

And finally, sandwiched – pun intended, I suppose – between all of this is chapter 9. In chapter 9, Paul uses himself as an example. And he is speaking, not so much about food, but about choosing to not exercise his rights for the benefit of others.

Paul explains that he had the right to take a wife and to have her travel with him, as Cephas (aka Simon Peter) and some of the other apostles have done. But instead, Paul chose to not exercise this freedom, because he thought it would be more beneficial in him living out his calling.

Similarly, Paul explains that he had the right to receive material compensation from the Corinthians as he was pastoring during his 18 months in Corinth. But instead, he didn’t choose to exercise his freedom because he didn’t think that it would be beneficial to their faith. Remember from a previous week, Paul did not want people to confuse him with the traveling stoic philosophers that spoke lofty words just to make a profit.

No, Paul was not in Corinth to focus on his freedom or on building a following for himself. Instead, he wanted to share the good news of Jesus, the savior of the world and how anyone in Corinth or anywhere else, can access God’s Kingdom through Jesus.

In light of all of this, what does this mean for us today? What relevance is there on this question of “to eat or not to eat.”

**I think that the big takeaway is that more important than the exercise of our freedom is our love and care for our brothers and sisters in Christ.**

We are called to truly love our neighbors as ourselves. And we are to especially love those that we are connected to as a church family and to love fellow believers around in the world in a very deep way.

To love means to actively meet people where they are. It is important to remember that just as we are not born physically mature, we are not born spiritually mature either. It takes time and learning and discipline. It doesn’t happen all over night.

And I do not believe that the Holy Spirit focuses on every one of our growth areas at the same time. Instead, He zeros in on this or that thing in order to under overwhelm us.

And however mature we may be in Christ, it is our duty to look out for those that are less mature.

While there are many possible examples of this, I will just focus on a few examples to illustrate this.

One is in regards to alcohol. Scripturally, there is no prohibition against drinking. Certainly, becoming drunk with alcohol is a sin, but there is nowhere in Scripture that says that Christians cannot drink alcohol.

In other words, there is a freedom to drink a moderate level of alcohol. But not every Christian understands this. And some Christians, like myself, have no interest in alcohol.

But just because Christians are free to drink does not mean that it is always a good thing. What would be some reasons why?

There are many. If you have had drinking problems or abuses before, please do not drink. If you are underage, do not drink.

And do not connect to organizations where drinking alcohol is expected of you – this would be like taking part on those idol feasts in Corinth.

But also, if your drinking could cause someone else to stumble, then it would be better to never drink again. Does that make sense?

Another example is it may include watching certain television programs or movies. As Christians we are free to watch most anything. But is everything good for us? No. Definitely not. There is a lot of junk out there.

But if we are watching something with others, we need to think about their well-being.

Just because we have the freedom to watch movies with swearing and violence and a moderate level of affection being shown does not mean that we should have any movie for our church movie nights or for you to watch with a friend.

Yes, we are free to watch, but it may not be beneficial many times, to others or to ourselves for that matter.

Do you see that this is truly a very relevant issue for us today as well? It applies to the music we choose to listen to and the games that we chose to play. And it can even still apply to food as well.

For example, in witnessing to a Jewish friend over lunch, it may be a good idea to eat kosher during the meal if you think that by not eating kosher will shut them down from listening to the gospel.

The bottom line is that we are to use our freedom in Christ for the benefit of others. This demonstrates that the love of Christ, the love of He who came to us to serve and lay down His life for the benefit of others, is being formed more and more within us.

Let’s pray…

Resources: [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6P3PfiNxNk>

**1 Corinthians 8-10 Idol Meat: Should We Eat or Not Eat It?**