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A1225 – June 17, 2012 – 1 Corinthians 8:7-13
Wounding Your Brother's Conscience

If you'd turn again to 1 Cor 8 we'll continue with the issue of meat sacrificed to idols in pagan temples. Remember, Corinth is where East met West, it was a crossroads in the ancient world and so there was a diversity of people here, a diversity of languages and a diversity of religious beliefs. To accommodate the various Greco-Roman and Oriental religions they were the gatekeepers of several pagan gods and goddesses: Poseidon, the god of the sea and Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, marriage and love. They also had a Temple of Apollo, the god of oracles and healing and throughout the city there were lesser gods and goddesses. But at the three major temples, Poseidon, Aphrodite and Apollo, pagan worshippers would bring daily animal sacrifices in honor of the god or goddess. The priests would take these animals and offer only a token portion to the deity to burn on the altar. The rest was consumed by the temple priests, attendants and their families. But frequently they could not eat all that was brought so they would sell the remaining meat to the butchers in the meat market. From there anyone could purchase the meat. And it was the very best meat; however, the butcher did not identify meat as having been offered to an idol in the marketplace. So if you wanted to buy meat you wouldn't know where the meat came from unless you asked. Paul says later in chapter 10, for the sake of conscience, don't ask, just buy the meat and eat it.

Now we don't really understand how sensitive the eating of meat was in the ancient world, especially between Jew and Gentile, the menu was a dividing line that kept a strict boundary between Jew and Gentile. Remember in the Book of Acts Peter had to see the vision of a white sheet coming down with clean and unclean animals all mixed together in it and God saying, Arise Peter, kill and eat! And you can just see Peter saying yuck, I'm not eating that, oh yes you are! God showed him the vision three times until finally he

was convinced that hey, God is telling me that food is not an issue between Jew and Gentile anymore and so I can go to Gentile Cornelius' house and step across the boundary, preach the gospel, sit down and dine. But that's something he never would have done without seeing that vision three times because to walk into a Gentile's house was, in his mind, to become unclean and when he got back to Jerusalem he'd have to go offer sacrifice to become clean again. So no way am I going in there. I don't eat that food! Peter illustrates the strict, strict boundary that existed and we really don't grasp the magnitude of that boundary coming down.

But the boundary had to come down because the Church isn't Jewish, the Church isn't Gentile, the Church is Jew and Gentile in one body. So how in the world are you ever going to get Jew and Gentile to sit down at table fellowship when one has a kosher menu and the other has a non-kosher menu? This came to a head in a preliminary way at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 but by no means was the whole thing solved at that council. That council concluded, on one hand, that Jewish believers should make concessions to Gentile believers, namely, they should not trouble Gentiles with the Law. Gentile believers are not under the Law of Moses? A tremendous concession but Paul had to keep dealing with it, he dealt with it in Galatians, in Romans, and that issue by no means went away and even today we have many Gentile believers putting themselves under parts of the Law of Moses. It's right here in the Hill Country. We're not under that Law. None of those Laws. On the other hand Gentile believers should make concessions to Jewish believers too, namely, to abstain from things sacrificed to idols and things strangled with the blood still in it and from close marriages. These were issues that had been burned on the Jewish conscience since Moses had been taught for generations every Sabbath in synagogue. But the Council by no means was the end of this issue either because here we see it cropping up in Corinth, it crops up in Romans. But the point of the Council of Jerusalem is that concession is a two way street. Jewish believers made concessions to Gentile believers and Gentile believers made concessions to Jewish believers. Why? Because there's no other way to get these two groups to sit down and have table fellowship with one another. The barrier between them had to come down for the Church to keep unity and to be built up in love. In the early church there was a strong desire to keep all local churches on the same page doctrinally, united around truth and to be built up in love, to grow, not just numerically but spiritually, to actually grow in

maturity. Both of these are concerns in the early church and these local churches are struggling over it, meat is getting in the way.

But the decision of the Council of Jerusalem paved the way for unity and growth by telling both groups to make concessions to the other. There may be areas of freedom where you can exercise your freedom because you have knowledge but is that going to build unity? You have to ask that question. All Christians may not have that knowledge. So is my exercise of freedom based on the knowledge I have going to cause them to violate their conscience? If it does and I exercise it, how is that loving my brother? Love is just as much a big deal in the NT as knowledge because the two are both Christian virtues, but they have to be combined in order to get the right results. Knowledge alone is not enough because then you have arrogant use of knowledge, love alone isn't enough because without knowledge you don't have any content to your love, it turns into mushiness. You have to combine love and knowledge, that's what builds up.

Now, we've broached the issue of conscience again, this is a stronger brother, weaker brother issue, so let's review the four points we covered last time and develop the conscience a bit. First of all, all humans have a conscience because all humans are made in the image of God. God has the infinite Qualities of righteousness and justice, so man, made in God's image has finite qualities of righteousness and justice, what we call conscience. The conscience is the faculty of man that answers to God's Qualities of righteousness and justice. And anytime a human being makes a moral judgment they are alerting you to the fact they have a conscience. Because that's what the conscience does. Second point, it judges. Conscience always judges according to a received standard of knowledge. In other words the conscience is not the standard itself, the conscience only judges according to a standard it has received, to knowledge it has gained. Well, where does that knowledge come from? It comes from parents, from culture, from teachers, from reading and so forth. The knowledge you build up may be right or the knowledge you build up may be wrong, but the conscience always judges infallibly according to your knowledge, which brings us to the third point. The conscience is never wrong in it's judgment. This is the point that bothers people, it sounds wrong at first, the conscience is never wrong? How can that be? I want to show you that it is not wrong at all by giving you three examples. Before we get to the examples, make sure you hear what I said, I

did not say if we follow our conscience we'll never do wrong, I just said that the conscience, when it's presented with a moral dilemma, always judges perfectly according to the standard it has received. But that standard may be right or wrong. That can only be decided based on a comparison with Scripture. Scripture never errs.

So what this means is you can do something right but your conscience condemns you. For example, some of those at Corinth ate meat but their conscience condemned them. There was nothing wrong with eating the meat, but since their conscience condemned them for eating, for them it was sin. Or you can do something wrong but your conscience not condemn you. For example, take Nazi Germany in the 1930's, it was immoral to be a Jew. That was a connection that was made in the minds of the Nazi's, not all Germans, that's not true, but those who had been indoctrinated with the ideology of Nazism and came to power in 1930's Germany, when they executed a Jew they were acting morally, they acted in good conscience. Most people can't understand that. But you'll never understand the Holocaust until you do. It was moral to kill a Jew. And to execute a Jew was not a violation of conscience. They acted in good conscience. They were doing what they thought was right even though it was wrong.

Take for another example the 21 Muslims who flew airplanes into buildings on Sept 11, 2001. Were they doing what was right or wrong? According to their consciences they were doing what was right because their knowledge base was informed by jihadist Islamic ideology where it is an act of moral obedience to kill Christians and Jews, infidels they call us, kill the infidel, some 60 times the Koran says kill the infidels. Well, if that's the knowledge base your conscience is judging by, then flying those planes into the towers was the most moral act they could do, they did it in good conscience, never thought twice about it, didn't violate their conscience one bit. Was it wrong? Yes, it was wrong, but that's because we compare their actions to a standard outside of human knowledge by which all actions are judged and that's God's knowledge revealed in the Scriptures. That's the real standard by which we measure whether something is right or wrong. But if we have the wrong standards by which we are measuring we can, in perfectly good conscience murder, rape, oppress, you name it. That's why it's so important to have the right knowledge which is God's knowledge to inform the conscience.

For the third example turn to Acts 23. The apostle Paul had a lot to say about his conscience. In this chapter he's on trial before the Sanhedrin and he's about to give his defense, his apologia. In verse 1, "Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day." Now that's quite a statement, my whole life I've followed my conscience. Verse 2, look at the response. "The high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth. 3Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!" Which is pretty rough language, it was slang for a hypocrite, he just called him a hypocrite because he was sitting there putting Paul on trial according to the Law and yet violating the Law. Verse 4, "But the bystanders said, "Do you revile God's high priest?" Now had Paul just spouted off those words in good conscience? Absolutely. He's not calling him a hypocrite because he's out of control, he's calling him a hypocrite because he's violating the Law. Paul did it in perfect conscience, verse 5, "And Paul said, "I was not aware, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'YOU SHALL NOT SPEAK EVIL OF A RULER OF YOUR PEOPLE.'" See, I was not aware? I did not have knowledge that was the high priest. If he had he probably wouldn't have said it. Now, this is an interesting passage on conscience for several reasons. One is because of the amazing statement in verse 1, Paul, are you telling me you lived your entire life up to that day with a perfectly good conscience, you never violated it even once? Yeah, that's what I'm saying. Even what Paul did by calling Ananias a hypocrite was done in good conscience. He was not aware he was the high priest. But the bigger lesson you've got to ask yourself is, if Paul did everything in his entire life with a good conscience then what does that mean about Paul's murdering Christians? Did Paul murder Christians? Yes he did. You can chalk up Stephen as one and there were others. Paul says later, I am not worthy to be an apostle because I persecuted the Church of God. But guess what? He did it in perfectly good conscience. Paul wasn't convicted of doing anything wrong when he murdered Christians. He thought he was doing right. It was the Christians who were wrong according to his Judaistic ideology. Christianity was against God from his point of view, so he was doing the will of God by killing Christians. Now you go put that one under your hat and think about it for awhile. Paul murdered Christians because the ultimate blasphemy to Paul, was to undermine Judaism. So Paul murdered Christians in good conscience! He says it right here in verse 1!

Now it may surprise you that you can do absolutely wrong in perfectly good conscience. But I've given you three examples; the Nazi's killing Jews, the Muslim's killing Americans and the apostle Paul killing Christians. So obviously just because you follow your conscience does not make what you are doing right; yet nevertheless you should always follow your conscience, which is equally interesting, never violate your conscience because it will destroy it's convicting power.

But what this points to is how important it is to have the right data in your head, the right standards. And where do we get that? The word of God. That's the only place. You can't rely on your noodle. Your noodle has no more omniscience than Paul's noodle. And you can see where following your own noodle will get you, Paul committed murder according to his own noodle and it was the greatest moral good. So you can't rely on that. You can do terrible things and yet do them in good conscience. So you have got to always go back to the standard of the Scriptures. And really, the right understanding of the Scriptures because Paul would have justified murdering Christians on the basis of his interpretation of the Scriptures. But he was using a wrong hermeneutic just like all the Pharisees did. And Jesus said you threw away the keys of knowledge and kept it from the people. They did that because they had developed an extra-biblical worldview, human view point as a lens by which to interpret the Bible and then turned around and used it to undermine the Bible. That's what sin does and Jesus was really ticked off about it. The Bible really is not too hard to understand, you read it straightforwardly, no games, just take it all or leave it all but don't play interpretive games because it's your understanding of Scripture as a Christian that informs your conscience.

And all the conscience does, when presented with some ethical dilemma, is look to the knowledge base you have and say right or wrong, that's all it does, and so it is a perfect judge, it is an absolutely consistent judge, it is never wrong.

And since we do not all have the same knowledge, knowledge is a function of spiritual maturity, then this is an area we have to be concerned with our fellow brethren. Our conscience and their conscience may not be judging according to the same standards. But guess what, their conscience is absolutely right and your conscience is absolutely right because the

conscience is always right. And therefore, fourth, you should never violate your conscience. That is the worst thing you could do. If you violate your conscience you are defiling your conscience, you are destroying its power to convict you. You don't destroy its ability to judge, it's always doing that, but you do destroy the effectiveness of the judgment the conscience renders. You are cutting yourself off from the convicting judgment the conscience renders. And that is a very bad thing according to the word of God. It's part of the process of the hardening of the heart, what Pharaoh went through, what the Pharisees went through.

So looked at mechanically, when you violate your conscience a barrier of insulation forms between you and your conscience, you wall yourself off from the judgments of your conscience and the Bible says you should never do that, never violate your conscience; always follow your conscience. And you ought to respect the fact that other believers have a conscience too and they can't do everything you can do in good conscience, it may be a fine thing to do, may be nothing wrong with it at all, but if you put pressure on them to do it and they violate their conscience, now how is that loving them, how is that building them up?

Now let's look at 1 Cor 8:7 and apply the things we've learned about conscience to the passage. They had a problem with eating meat sacrificed at the local pagan temples, whether it was at the idol's feast, in the market or in a private home. How are they supposed to deal with this? Some had knowledge that the idols didn't even exist so their point was, hey, it's the best meat in town, I have the freedom to eat, so why not eat? However, another group in verse 7 did not have that knowledge did they? They couldn't separate the meat from the idol. Let's see how Paul says it, **However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol. Accustomed** means "a connection has been established in a person's mind." Connections get formed in our mind as we grow and develop in maturity. They may be right or wrong connections, they may be connections made by Nazi ideology or Islamic ideology or Marxist ideology or Biblical ideology. I don't know, but when we become Christians we come into the Christian life with all this baggage, all sorts of connections. The slate isn't wiped clean just because you believed in Jesus, we have connections that have to be disconnected and new connections have to be formed, false ideologies and their power over us have

to be broken and the true ideology has to be put in place. But this all takes time. It doesn't happen over night. It's the renewing of the mind that Paul talked about in Romans 12, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." That takes time, often years, years and years of Bible study. Now some of those at Corinth were moving through this renewal of mind faster than others or they'd been believers longer, they learned to separate the meat from the idol, no problem for them to eat. Others still had the connection, the meat was connected to the idol, no way can they eat. We're dealing with different levels of maturity and that's what Paul means where he says, **some being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol.** They still had that connection and if you come along with all your knowledge and by your eating they say, hmm, I shouldn't eat this but they're eating it so I guess I'll eat it too, then what does the end of verse 7 say, **their conscience being weak is defiled.** And that Greek word **defiled** means "stained, polluted." The point is it blocks the convicting power of the conscience, it starts to numb the conscience so what happens over time is your conscience loses its convicting power. It's not that it still doesn't say, that's right, that's wrong, it's just that by defiling it you cut yourself off from the power of the conviction, it gets suppressed.

And that's what you've done to your brother with a weak conscience by eating in front of him, he eats too and now his conscience is polluted further, it's destroying his spiritual life because his spiritual life is related to his ability to be convinced of sin. Some of us are sensitive to sin because our consciences have not been defiled and so when we sin what do we do? We quickly confess because our conscience pricks us and won't leave us alone; others are insensitive to sin because their consciences have been defiled over and over and over and so they don't confess sin very often and they get all kinds of gunk built up in their soul. Instead of managing sin these people blame it on others, play the blame game, they rationalize their sin, offer a never ending stream of justifications which all sound quite convincing to themselves.

And Paul's point is I don't want you to defile your conscience by violating it. And if you as a strong believer can eat and you by eating cause a weaker brother to eat that's bad because you've caused him to sin, you are the problem even though you ate in good conscience. You're sinning against the brethren and against Christ.

Notice verse 8, **But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.** Here he's just laying down a principle about food and spirituality. You might translate the word **commend**, "make closer," **food will not make us closer to God.** There was an idea in the ancient world that food could make you closer or farther from a god. That's why they had all the animals being sacrificed in the pagan temples. Somehow this gets you closer to the god or goddess. Paul says food will not get you closer to the God of Creation. You can't transfer pagan principles over to Christianity. There is no connection between food and spirituality in Christianity. **We neither lack if we do not eat, nor do we gain if we do eat.** We don't lack God's approval if we abstain from certain foods, nor do we gain God's approval if we do eat. Whether we eat or not these foods is really irrelevant to spirituality. Paul himself had the freedom to eat, which is really saying something since he had once been a Pharisee of Pharisees, **but**, verse 9, **But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.** And this is a command, the verb **take care** is a command to all the stronger brethren, **take care that this liberty**, this right to eat, **does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak**, that is, that exercising your right to eat does not cause them to eat, thereby sinning, violating their conscience, polluting it and making it less able to convict them of sin. In short, destroying their spirituality. This is what you do by using your liberty without respect to your brother. So just because you have a liberty does not by any means imply that you should exercise it. And if you do in this case you're causing these people to short circuit. You're destroying the ability of their conscience to convict them.

Verse 10, example, **For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idols temple**, so you're over there in the Temple of Apollo enjoying the best BBQ in town and someone sees you, **will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?** The implied answer is yes. You, in a way, are tempting him to go against his conscience, you are enabling him to eat and thereby sin. You can't, as the stronger brother, say, well, it's not my fault they sinned, I'm not sinning and they ought to just get over it, there's nothing to the meat. No, you don't do that. That's putting temptation in the way of your weaker brethren; you're causing them to stumble. Now someone will say, well, maybe they see me and maybe they won't see me, granted, it's a 3rd class condition

here, maybe they will, maybe they won't, but if they do, and that's the risk, you don't know if someone's going to see you or not, and if they do what your doing is enabling them to sin, your aiding them in sinning and you're not supposed to do that.

Verse 11, **For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined**, actually it says, "destroyed utterly," and its emphatic. The emphasis in the verse is on the utter destruction you've caused your brother because you've acted according to knowledge but not in combination with love to sin and thereby destroyed his conscience utterly. The NT is very concerned that you do not cause a brother conscience to be destroyed, wiping away its convicting power by strengthening him to defile it. And if you do you are responsible for doing this to your brother's conscience.

Now we want to comment on the fact that he is called your **brother**. Most Christians don't think of other Christians as brothers and sisters in Christ and they don't treat them as brothers and sisters in Christ, they think first of all of blood lines and secondly only of spiritual lines. But don't you find it interesting that the terminology used throughout the NT is family terminology. God is our father and we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We're closer actually, in God's eyes, to those who are spiritual brothers and sisters in Christ than we are to those who are physical brothers and sisters in Christ because spiritual family trumps physical family. This is why we ought to really be close, we are family. We may not be kinsmen according to the flesh but we are kinsmen according to the Spirit. And put in that light, should we ruin our brother? Why would we utterly destroy the conscience of our brother? We ought to do everything to build up our brother, not tear him down.

And not only is he your brother but he is **the brother for whose sake Christ died**, the central fact that clinches the argument. Christ died to save this brother; you exercise your liberty to utterly destroy him. How can you do something to him so contrary to Christ's purpose on the cross for him? And I know people don't take this seriously, I know they think, well, it's my right and I'm going to exercise my right because that's what I want to do. But this is your brother, the one for whose sake Christ died. Think again! Act differently! Christ died to cleanse our conscience; you've eaten to defile your brothers conscience.

Verse 12, **And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience**, and that's plural, some say here your sinning against the Church, but the problem with that interpretation is the Church doesn't have a **conscience**, only individuals have conscience. So he's just saying, when you do this you sin **against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak**, that is, your progressively making it weaker and weaker, the **wounding** it means you are beating it, you are inflicting a blow on their conscience and what that is doing is destroying the convicting power of their conscience more and more until this believer won't confess his sin because he's not convicted of his sin. That's the very real danger here, destroying someone else's conscience of the ability to convict of sin. Because you have to be convicted of your sin before you can confess. Why would you confess something if you're not convicted you really committed a sin. And so by sinning against the brethren you inflict a blow on their conscience when it's already weak to begin with and **you sin against Christ** Paul says, you miss the mark. Now you're out of fellowship.

What's interesting is, fundamentally, it's not wrong to eat the meat, but this person's conscience says it's wrong to eat, so by violating his conscience he sins. He did something that was not sinful but to him it was sin because his conscience said not too and whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

Paul concludes, verse 13, **Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never**, by no means, strongest Greek negative, **I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble**. And we should all follow the same practice no matter what it is. Paul is quite decisive in arguing that your liberty as a Christian is not as important as your brother's conscience. A brother's conscience has a higher priority than your own liberty. So we ought to sacrifice our liberty for the sake of our brother, the one for whom Christ died.

[Back To The Top](#)

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