

When Grace Liberties Become Stumbling Blocks

By Jeff Noblit

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Preached on: Sunday, June 12, 2016

Anchored in Truth Ministries

1915 Avalon Ave.
Muscle Shoals, AL 35661

Website: www.anchoredintruth.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/anchoredintruth

Grab your Bibles and we're going to go back to 1 Corinthians 8. You say, "Back?" That means you were not here last Sunday night if you don't know that we were there last Sunday night. Never done this before but I'm preaching the same text this morning I preached last Sunday night but I have completely rewritten the message on it. It just grabbed ahold of me partly because I asked some young people what they learned from it and they didn't understand some of the concepts so I thought I'd give it another try and hopefully do a better job because this is a great truth pertaining to the Lord's table but also pertaining to mature church life, Christian body life.

Of course, Paul is writing to a church that about got everything wrong you could get wrong: they were full of immaturities; they were taking pride in spiritual gifts, one glorying above the other one. One thing they were not doing is walking in Christian love and that's where Paul is so heavily throughout the epistle is reminding them that love trumps everything. Love is supreme. No matter whatever else spiritually you think you have going for you, you must govern everything or put everything in subservience under Christian love.

Let's look at it together, 1 Corinthians 8, the whole chapter beginning in verse 1.

1 Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. 2 If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; 3 but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him. 4 Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, 6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him. 7 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; and their conscience being weak is defiled. 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. 9 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling

block to the weak. 10 For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? 11 For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. 12 And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.

I've simply titled this exposition "When Liberties of Grace Become Stumbling Blocks." When liberties of grace become stumbling blocks. Now, let me try to define two or three terms before we get going. Liberty, as Paul uses the word in this chapter, has the idea of not feeling condemned when you partake or participate in some indifferent matter. Now, there are things that the Bible is not indifferent about: we're not supposed to lie; we're not supposed to steal; thou shalt not commit adultery; and on and on we could go with things that are settled moral absolutes from God. Those are not indifferent but throughout the ages there have been numbers of things that various Christian groups would determine that, "Now, we've decided these things are wrong; these things defile you before God; these are sinful. You can't do these." Well, Christian liberty under grace means that you can now do those indifferent things the Bible doesn't clearly announce as a moral absolute and you can do those things without condemnation. So under grace, we have lots of liberties, things that are generally indifferent and no matter what various groups and legalisms may be going on around us, we know that if we do these certain things or don't do them, they neither make us more pleasing to God nor less pleasing to God. They are indifferent things and we don't let people make rules about those to impose them upon us. We have liberty in those areas. Have you got that? Is that okay? Alright. One guy speaks for everybody.

Now knowledge. He talks in here about some have knowledge and the converse of that, he says, but some are weak. Some have knowledge but some are weak. Now, the ones who have knowledge in this context are those who know their freedom and victory in grace. They have knowledge, we're saved by grace through faith in Christ, and in this particular setting, if we eat a t-bone steak that some fanatic sacrificed to an idol that morning, it just doesn't matter to God. Enjoy the t-bone steak. We have knowledge that we're saved by grace alone, in Christ alone, through faith alone, for the glory of God alone, and whether or not I eat this meat that people have varying degrees about it as far as will it condemn me or make me unclean before God, that just doesn't matter because I'm saved by grace. Eating that meat can't make me more close to God, not eating the meat can't make me more close to God, and vice versa. So knowledge that we're saved by grace and we don't have all these rules to keep to please God is what he's talking about here. Now, the weak in this context, the weak ones are those who came out of idolatry and though they're grasping grace and maybe genuinely converted, they still, if they eat that meat that they know somebody sacrificed to an idol, they feel like they're worshipping an idol. They feel condemned in their conscience that they're worshipping an idol and sinning against God. They don't have knowledge. They're still condemned so that's kind of the context we're dealing with here.

Now, let's introduce the whole thing by beginning in verse 4 and going through verse 8. Paul says in verse 4, "Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one." So as Christians, we know the truth, that is, there is no deity and there is no God but the one true God. In Orthodox Jewish teaching, the first thing a Jewish boy learns is the Shema from the book of Deuteronomy, "The LORD our God is one LORD," and Christians avow that just the same. Now, there are demons behind all false religions but there is only one God and any other entity out there are not Gods, they're subservient to the one true God.

He continues on in verse 5 and says, "For even if there are so-called gods," in other words, people claim they are so-called gods, "whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords," according to people is what Paul means; verse 6 again, "yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him." So we hold, as Paul is writing here, there is one eternal, self-existing, Almighty God and one Lord, Jesus Christ, who is the administrator of the universe.

Now verse 7, "However," that being true and that's being general Christian truth, "However not all men have this knowledge," they are still growing in their understanding, "some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol," that's the way they're thinking of it, "and their conscience being weak is defiled." Now, in case you don't know, in this day, practically all the meat in the Greek culture came from these pagan temples where they would sacrifice the animal that morning to their idol and then they'd often have restaurants connected to the temple. You've got your freshest best cuts of meat at the idol temple restaurant. I don't know what they were called but that's what it was. And Christians had varying convictions about, "Should we do this and should we not?" Paul says a mature knowledge tells you it's fine. God made the meat. If you run from everything some unbeliever falsely used, you'd have to leave the world. As a matter of fact, Paul says that on one occasion. But he says it's a little different when a brother is struggling; you want to be careful what you do in those kind of cases. Everyone hasn't grown to that position yet. Some can't shake off that it's worshipping an idol.

We had a lady in our church many years ago and she gave good evidence of genuine conversion but she came out of a staunch legalistic background and every Sunday after she would hear me preach, she would go home by herself in her own home and partake of her own communion. She'd take the juice and eat the cracker because she was afraid that she wasn't doing all she's supposed to do. She couldn't shake off the legalism of going through those works to save herself. We didn't condemn her. We loved her and hopefully she has grown. She's no longer here but hopefully she's grown through that.

And Paul says here when this happens, those weak ones, in this context, when they go ahead and they eat that meat and they're not free to know it's all grace and there is nothing wrong with the meat, then it does violate their conscience, that internal court

where attitudes and actions are judged. They feel condemned. Verse 7, he uses the word, "their conscience being weak is," here's the word, "defiled." "Defiled" means "stained or polluted." The point is their conscience is not stained or polluted because of the meat that they ate, but by doing that which their conscience does not allow. That's the key. It wasn't the meat, it's just where they were in their understanding and they were defiled in their conscience.

Again, and then Paul summarizes, verse 8, "But food will not commend us to God," Food doesn't make you clean and holy before God. "We are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat." Now, again in this context, both the Greco-Roman culture and the Jewish culture had lots of dietary laws in their spiritual worship so they're all coming out of all of this stuff and trying to grasp the glories of the liberties of grace.

So, in summary, the mature brother has true Christian doctrinal knowledge. He realizes that meat is an indifferent thing; it's no big deal, you eat it and enjoy it. God made it. Just because somebody misused it this morning at an idol temple, it doesn't matter. The weak brother can't do that. If he goes ahead and eats of it, he's just not free yet in that liberty. He feels condemned. He feels he has sinned. Alright, that's our introduction. That kind of sets the stage for where we are, particularly in this historical cultural context.

Now, I. You are a stumbling block when you encourage others to do that which violates their conscience. That's the point Paul is really making here. You may be 100% right in your knowledge, but if you're doing so, partaking of your liberty under grace, it encourages a brother whose not quite there yet to go ahead and do what they saw you doing but they feel condemned for it, then you've become their stumbling block. That's what Paul is saying.

Now, verse 9 and 10 is our text here. Verse 9 he says, "But take care," you're 100% right but take care lest "this liberty," you can define it, "this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." So your conscience does not condemn me because your conscience is properly informed by Christian truth, eating the meat is not a sin. However, if your behavior encourages that weaker brother who still believes it's sin to go ahead and eat it and feel condemned in his conscience, then that becomes a concern because their conscience condemns them. And listen, here's the point, Paul is saying this: when you help a man learn to violate his conscience, you are helping him digress in his Christian pilgrimage, not progress. You're making him go backwards. You see, if someone learns to violate their conscience, even if they're wrongly thinking about things, but if they learn to violate their conscience, they are flattening the tires of their Christian journey. As Christians, as we mature, maturation requires learning to yield to the promptings of the Holy Spirit – listen – as the Holy Spirit works with his tool, the conscience. So it's very important that we don't help another brother, even if he's wrong in his thinking, violate his conscience. That's where Paul is coming from.

So Paul is basically saying no Christian has the right or the liberty, you can translate it either way, to do anything that harms another brother. Liberty in Christ – listen to your pastor this morning – liberty in Christ is wonderful and as wonderful as it is, liberty is not

our banner. Our banner is love and liberty is the servant of our love for Christ and one another. Are you with me there? We don't back up on our liberties, amen? We glory in the liberties of grace but there is something mightier than that, that's the love in my heart for the brethren. That's where Paul is coming from because these Corinthians were quite immature and quite proud of their liberties. "We will eat the meat! We have no problem with it." Kind of scorning and disdaining the weaker brother who is still troubled and convicted that he shouldn't eat it. You know, knowledge without love becomes brutality.

Now verse 10, "For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple," now remember, that's the restaurant connected to the idol temple, "will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?" In other words, you Christians, you Corinthians rather, you arrogantly thought that you were helping the weaker brother by sort of prodding and poking and even shaming him and encouraging him to go ahead and eat of the meat even though his conscience condemned him but you were not helping him at all. So the point is: we've got to be very careful as Grace Life Church of the Shoals that though under grace we have lots of liberties on indifferent things, that we're not helping a weaker brother in our small group perhaps to stumble and have difficulty in his progression for Christ because my weaker brother and his progression is far far more important than any liberty I might want to partake of, that is, if love is in my heart. That's why love is the primary thing, not liberty.

Now, I would expand this out taking in some other New Testament truth. I would expand this out to anything that hinders my effectiveness as a church leader. Whether you're a church elder, the preaching pastor, whomever that may be, a church deacon, a small group leader or any place where you're set before someone else, you have to be a little extra careful. The Bible says, "Let not many of you become teachers," and I think primarily that means the role of, the office of teacher, elder, though the truth could apply to maybe even small group leaders. "Let not many of you become teachers," why does James say that? "Because as such you will incur a stricter judgment." Your position is one that can do much good or you could even do more damage to Christians because of the position that you have so you have to be more careful.

This is what Paul was practicing in Acts 16:3, "Paul wanted this man," and this is Timothy; Paul wanted this man, Timothy, "to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek." Now, this is Timothy. Paul knows, Paul is the most ardent teacher that the works of Judaism can't save, but in this situation, I might add, in this situation only, he and Timothy gave up their liberty to refuse one of these laws of the Jews, circumcision, because they couldn't gain a hearing in the synagogues and that was their ministry for that time to preach in the Jewish synagogues. So for expediency to get a hearing of the Gospel, they gave up that liberty and Paul had Timothy circumcised just to take away that offense.

Now, you've got to be real careful here because this doesn't apply in any and every case. I work with pastors all the time, I've spent this week working with pastors and church elders of other churches trying to walk them through some things and when they request,

we try to help. That's what we try to do in our ministries here and, you know, some of these guys come under, I have myself come under incredible multiplying criticisms. This person says, "Well, this offends me. Pastor, this offends me." The pastor goes there, "This offends me." The pastor has this and that and pretty soon it's impossible to yield to all of it. It's what Charles Haddon Spurgeon and, by the way, any man of God preaching the word of God in truth and trying to build a true church will come under extreme criticisms and scrutinies and you've got to listen, you've got to be humble and grow from them, but if you keep taking it all in, you'll go insane. You'll get into morbid introspection and you're not good for the Gospel so there's a balance here.

Now, some of you folks working in the office, working in the factory, you've got to be careful too. People know you love Christ, they know what you stand for, and every one of them has got their three or four or five little do's or don'ts or legalisms they want to impose on you and you should try to an extent to not offend anybody so you can be...but there's a point, Jim, there's a point where you just can't do enough. You'll go crazy and not be good for anything so while in my own local church and with people who basically know and love Christ, I should be hyper-sensitive to make sure I don't do anything to keep my effectiveness diminish before my brethren. In the world, I believe it's a tool of Satan if you're not careful to just hogtie you and make you, if nothing else, so discouraged and depressed you can't even hardly go on.

We do know in another case with Titus, false teachers tried to force Titus to be circumcised and Paul wouldn't let Titus be circumcised because there was a difference. They didn't want Titus to be circumcised so that they could get a hearing for the Gospel, they wanted Titus to be circumcised so they could proclaim their false doctrine of Jewish works added to the Gospel as the real Gospel and Paul said, "That's corrupting the Gospel. We will not do it this time." Are you with me? So when they added doctrine to what saves, they said, "No! If we can jump through a cultural hoop so you'll hear us," they said, "yes, we'll do that." But there's a real difference in Timothy's circumcision to get a hearing and Titus being requested to be circumcised to add to their works doctrine of salvation.

So all these things have a balance to them but I would challenge you as brothers and sisters in Christ, you know what our culture is, you know we're in the Bible Belt, you know what the Baptist Christian culture has been in the past, be mature enough in your love that you would gladly give up a liberty on an indifferent item if somehow it keeps your small group, keeps your church family, whoever it is, from hearing you without struggling or being offended.

First of all, we don't want to do anything even if we have the right and the liberty to do it if it causes a weaker brother to violate his conscience because that's a key factor in him growing. He must not learn to violate his conscience, even if he's ill-informed. II. As a stumbling block, you reverse the brother's growth in Christ. When you become that stumbling block, you begin to put him on a digression instead of a progression in Christ. In verse 11 he says it very clearly, "For through your knowledge," you're right, you've got true knowledge but "he who is weak is ruined." That word "ruined" is a strong word, it

literally means he's destroyed. So the knowledge of a more mature Christian by being careless, and I might add selfish, inflicts ruinous disaster on the weaker brother because you don't want him to learn to violate his conscience.

Then he continues on in verse 11, "the brother for whose sake Christ died." He adds more weight to this argument. Christ died for him to save him from destruction, to put him on the path to godliness and righteousness, to rescue him from destruction and eternal loss and now you're helping him reverse to destruction. It's a very strong rebuke. It's a very very strong rebuke.

He adds further to that, let's see, verse 12, "And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ." Wounding that man's conscience means – here's what happens: when a person stops listening to their conscience and they learn, they grow comfortable wounding their conscience but going ahead and doing something, they are damaging one of the primary tools necessary for righteousness and sanctification. Hear what I'm saying? That's a key tool God has given us to grow. The truth of God comes in our minds, the Spirit of God comes in our hearts and works with enlightening and illuminating our conscience so that we're now convicted about the right kind of stuff and not the wrong kind of stuff. But at the foundation stone of it all, you just don't learn to violate your conscience. That's a terrible thing to do. So in this context, very flagrantly, boisterously and proudly, Corinthians were making a mockery of the weaker brethren and pushing them into behaviors which they felt condemned if they did them. He says, "Don't do that. You're putting them in reverse spiritually."

Then he says in verse 12 it's "a sin against Christ." Another powerful reproof here. Remember when the Apostle Paul was converted, the Lord spoke from heaven, knocked him off of his horse and he said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" What was the point? Saul was unconverted. He hated Christianity. He was locking up Christians, putting them in jail just for believing in Christ and Jesus said, "No. You thought you were just persecuting Christians," Jesus the Lord of glory says, "No, you're persecuting me. When you persecute the brethren, you persecute me."

In Matthew 25, Jesus teaches the parable and he teaches how in the coming age there is going to be great persecutions against genuine believers. Not the false church. Not the counterfeit harlot church but true believers in the end times will be persecuted and, he says, "You'll know other true believers because they'll help minister, give food to, take in their house and clothe their brothers and sisters who are being persecuted." And he says, "And when you do any of these things for the least of these my brothers, you do it unto me."

Well, Paul says here, "Do you realize, perhaps you Corinthians maybe you're just being thoughtless, but when that weaker brother is not mature to be able to eat that meat that that morning was sacrificed to an idol without condemning his conscience, do you realize when you encourage him to do that by your own behavior, you're sinning against Jesus Christ not just another brother?" Weighty stuff. Weighty stuff.

III. So as a stumbling block, you may have knowledge but not love. One form, one type of a stumbling block that this particular text points out is that you can have knowledge but not love. In verses 1 through 3, he says, "Well, now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge." All Christians have some of the truth. Some more than others, but all have some form of the truth. Then he continues and says, "But knowledge makes arrogant," that is, knowledge by itself; knowledge not governed by Christian love only produces a proud arrogance which in itself is sin. Knowledge apart from the governance of love is actually not true knowledge but it's a warped and perverse knowledge. We have, you know, we hold to the doctrines of grace. We hold to reformed theology. We hold to sovereign grace. Use your term, we hold to it. Why? Because it's biblical and, by the way, so did the overwhelming majority of our Baptist forefathers. It has come out of vogue in the last few generations but early Baptists strongly held to these doctrines.

But there has come a giant wave of people that hold to these doctrines and I'm afraid they're a whole lot like the people Paul is talking about, they have correct knowledge but I wonder where the love is. Now listen to me, don't miss this: if they don't passionately love the local church, their knowledge is out of whack. So many of them want to write books, teach seminars, be on the programs, preach at the conferences, be esteemed as, "We have the true knowledge of the doctrines of grace," but they have a mild attachment and commitment to the brethren, the local church. And Paul says, "You've got knowledge but where's love? You've missed it." Look, by the way, if you have all knowledge and you miss love, you've still missed everything. I'd far rather work with a brother who doesn't have all the doctrines of grace figured out; he might be still a little Arminian leaning. If he loves Jesus and loves the brethren, I can work with him. I know some brethren that dot every "i" and cross every "t" with my theology and I can't stand to be around them.

So knowledge but the knowledge is there to be the tool and the servant of love. It's like those women in 2 Timothy 3:7, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. There were these silly women, these ungodly women in the church, probably not really converted. They'd chase this Bible study, then they'd go after that Bible study. They'd chase this spiritual guide or teacher, then they'd follow this spiritual guide. They're always learning new stuff and going in different directions every six months. Always learning, never coming to the knowledge of the truth.

Listen, here's the point: we do want the proper knowledge, the proper head information, but it must be accompanied by genuine heart transformation that always results in a love manifestation for the brethren. Did you get that? Head information, true doctrines of the Bible in my brain, but a heart transformation, "I have been regenerated in my heart by the Spirit of God and it has given me a divine capacity to love God and love his church I didn't have before." So I have that proper information, heart transformation, which always – listen to your pastor – always, always, always results in a love for the brethren manifestation. Now it may be immature, but it's there. Don't tell me the guy that's supposed to know God, or the lady that's supposed to know God, know truth and know

doctrine and they don't have a passionate, devoted, sacrificial love for the local New Testament church. Now, I'll give them this out: a lot of local New Testament churches don't have enough regenerate people in it to love very much but they ought to be looking for one that does because that's the way it's designed to work.

1 Corinthians 13:2, Paul hints on this truth again. "If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries," here it is, "and all knowledge." If I have all knowledge, I know all the mysteries of the doctrines of the faith. "And if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." Do you know what "nothing" means there? It means absolute zero. You may can write the most incredible theological treatises on true Bible doctrine but if you're not using that in God's local New Testament church to serve and bless the brethren, you've missed everything. You've missed it all. So Paul writing in 1 Corinthians 13 has told them the sign gifts, speaking in tongues, miracles, healings, and even the more important teaching gifts, are all nothing apart from the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit's indwelling love. So he says, "If all you've got is knowledge, that's going to make you arrogant and that's the opposite of love." You see, head knowledge can make one look big but love makes him truly big.

But then he says, "Some have knowledge, that can make you arrogant," he said, "but love edifies." In other words, love always seeks to deny self and serve the brethren. I'm not worried about my gift. I'm not worried about my knowledge. I want the brethren to do well in Christ. Now, don't just serve them by anybody's definition of service. I serve them according to true knowledge, the book, which means that sometimes I may reprove them, sometimes I may rebuke them, sometimes I may tolerate injustice from them because I love them, but I love them according to the book. But true love always seeks selfless edification of others.

He continues on in 8, verse 2, "If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know." If anyone thinks he knows anything means if anyone thinks he's arrived; he's come to the bottom of the matter. In other words, both in knowledge and in walking in Christian love, you never arrive but you ought to be well on the journey, amen? And one simple point is: God is infinite so we never arrive. We just keep learning and humbling ourselves and growing and repenting or we're off track. The first point in true knowledge is humility that we know so little. One man said knowledge is proud that it has learnt so much, wisdom is humble that it knows no more.

Verse 3, "but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him." This is the key verse of the whole thing and that is, are you known by him? Has your heart been changed because you're one he knows? You see, the important thing, the foundation thing – listen to your pastor – is not do you know God but does God know you? You can study at Vanderbilt Divinity School and learn a lot about God and say you know him but he doesn't know you. There's a big difference. 2 Timothy 2:19 says, "The Lord knows those who are His."

Then if I could in closing elaborate a little on John 10:26-27, "But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me." He does not say this, you see, in my flesh, I want Jesus to say this, "You do

not believe so you're not my sheep." That's not what he says, "You do not believe because you're not my sheep. You're not one I know." By the way, all that are his, he foreknew from the foundation of the world. So, first, it's not, "You're not my sheep because you don't believe," it's, "You don't believe because you're not my sheep." You can't make that text say anything else. And second, "My sheep," verse 27 of John 10, "My sheep are known by Me and they hear My voice and they will follow Me."

So as Paul is writing to the Corinthians, in verse 3 of chapter 8, and all this thing about love and liberty and everything, he says, "The real key is if you've got a heart that loves God, he started the whole thing. If you love God, you're known by him," that's his words, "you're one of his known ones that he has saved in time and in space history and that's why you have a love capacity you can't naturally have." Why do you sit here and listen to this preacher preach week after week, some of you 35, 36 years now? Why do you do that? Because God put a love for the truth in you you don't naturally have. If he did not, you'd be chasing the most clever, creative, fun, entertaining church in town right now instead of strong, clear, Bible preaching. Why am I called to preach? This is nothing, I knew nothing of this growing up. Why my love for the Scriptures? God changed my heart because I was known by him and that gave me a love capacity for the truth and for the church and for the brethren. Brothers and sisters, I don't preach to you to have a job, I don't preach to you to draw a paycheck, I preach to you out of love for Christ and love for you.

Verse 13 as we conclude. I've already said I was concluding a while ago, didn't I? I promise you this time. Paul summarizes and says, "Here's how a mature loving Christian deals with his rightful liberties when he's got weaker brothers that might be offended and stumble." "Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble." On another occasion in 2 Corinthians 5:14 Paul said the love of Christ controls us. Well, that's what happens when the love of Christ controls you. "Whatever it is that may cause my brethren to stumble, I'll get rid of it." Paul, an elite Jew before his conversion, Paul, one of elite superior knowledge, he called himself a Hebrew of the Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee. He said, "I was of the highest learned men in Jerusalem." He knew the word of God but all he had before conversion was head knowledge. This Paul who had this immense head knowledge all of a sudden by God initiating the meeting with Paul while he was riding his horse down the road, Paul experienced the heart transformation and now 1 Corinthians 8:13, "I'll never eat meat again if it hurts my brother." That's the love manifestation. He had the head information, the heart transformation, always has a love manifestation.

Now, for us sitting in this room this morning, as your pastor, can I lovingly exhort you if not reprove or rebuke you: some of you are out of balance. You're a little too weighty on your liberties and you're a little too weak on love. You're a little too high on your liberty and a little too weak on your love. In 1 Corinthians 6:12, Paul said, "All things are lawful for me." In other words, there's nothing I can do to work my way into heaven and there's nothing I can do to keep Jesus from saving me once he saved me. In a sense, it's a figure of speech. "All things are lawful but not all things are profitable. I will not be mastered by anything." Here's the point, here's the point: in truth, the most valuable thing in the

universe is the bride of Christ and our devotion to mature help and able to build up the church, the bride of Christ, is the most important thing to the mind of God and if I'm letting some little indifferent habit, behavior in my life, hurt Christ or another Christian, I am being mastered by what I called my liberty. I'm no longer free, I'm a slave. You mean you'll let some little behavior hinder your effectiveness in the body of Christ because you want your right and you want your liberty? Paul says, "You don't understand. That's no longer liberty, you're enslaved because in Christian love you know the truth about the value of the church and you wouldn't dare do anything to hinder your influence there or your effectiveness there."

We're coming upon a new small group year and in years past we have had all small group leaders to sit down and read some covenant commitments, some things were on there like, "I'll try not to miss more than eight Sundays." It wasn't legalism but some good things. "I'll be faithful to all the services and the visitation. I'll faithfully return tithes and participate in the missions offering. I'll abstain from the use of alcohol. I'll submit to church elders." And there were several others. Having that written out and having folks to sign and agree, that's not wrong. There is some good in that. But do you know what we found? We haven't done that in a long time because when you have a church that loves from the heart, love fulfills the law. A real Christian with love wouldn't want to do anything contrary to the things that are effective for their service and ministry in the body.

So what I would ask you, though, as we go into this small group year, small group teachers, is your love enough to do what's right? I mean, anyone that says, "I'll tell you what, I'll do this. Or I'll tell you what I'll do that. They're not going to tell me what to do." I'm not worried about the "that," I'm worried about has your heart been transformed? Where is the love capacity only the new birth can put in there? That would be the issue at hand. Now, certainly there are people that come from different places and different cultures and maybe when they come into the South we just have to guide them but down here, it may not be right and they may be the weaker brethren, but this right here is considered offensive. If you can give that up, you'd be a better church member. Folks, that's just the way it is in life. That's the way it is in every culture and every part of the world. That's the way it is in every church in every culture in every part of the world. There are some particular things that we shouldn't have to deal with but it's a very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very minor thing when Jesus died for the church for us to give up a liberty for the church. That's what love does.