

**Sermon preached by Pastor Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 4, 2007**

THE EXERCISE OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Last June, just four months after becoming the youngest quarterback ever to win the Super Bowl, Big Ben Roethlisberger of the Pittsburgh Steelers was involved in a serious motorcycle accident in downtown Pittsburgh. When the driver of another vehicle failed to yield at an intersection, Roethlisberger was thrown from his motorcycle into the windshield of her Chrysler Town and Country. His motorcycle was totaled, and emergency surgeons spent over seven hours repairing a broken jaw, a fractured skull, missing teeth, and several other facial injuries.

Roethlisberger's injuries were so severe, you may recall, because he wasn't wearing a helmet at the time of the accident. Pennsylvania law doesn't require a person to wear a helmet when riding a motorcycle. When asked by an ESPN reporter about a year before the accident why he doesn't wear a helmet when he rides, Big Ben said: "Because you don't have to. It's not the law (in Pennsylvania). If it was the law, I'd definitely have one on every time I ride. But it's not the law and I know I don't have to. You're just more free when you're out there with no helmet on."

That was before the accident. After his release from the hospital following the accident last June, Roethlisberger apologized to Steeler fans, to his team, and to his family for risking his health and his life unnecessarily. A few days later, in another interview, it was clear that he was no longer focused on taking advantage of his freedom. He said: "In the past few days, I've gained a new perspective on life. By the grace of God, I'm fortunate to be alive." He also said that if he does ever ride a motorcycle again, "it will certainly be with a helmet."

As G. K. Chesterton pointedly observed: "To have a right to do a thing is not at all the same as to be right in doing it." That is a principle which may have a thousand applications to life. Or more.

In our text today in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul addresses an issue that is completely foreign to our experience in America today. What to do about meat that has been sacrificed to idols is not a problem we face in our culture. But it was a problem the Corinthians faced every day. It was such a pressing problem that the Corinthians asked Paul for his counsel on how to deal with it. In Paul's response, given under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we gain valuable insight into the larger question of how we are to exercise our freedom as brothers and sisters in Christ who are connected to one another under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

The question the Corinthians put to Paul was essentially this: Could Christians eat meat that had been offered to idols in the pagan temples in Corinth? It was not a merely theoretical question. The fact of the matter was that most meat in the markets in Corinth

came from animals which had been sacrificed at pagan temple ceremonies. So questions arose: Did those pagan rituals in some way contaminate the meat?

Could Christians buy it?

Could they eat it if they were dinner guests in the homes of friends?

What about meats at social events such as weddings or parties or clubs which met in temple dining halls:

Could Christians participate and eat meat at such events?

In such a cultural environment, the only ways to be sure you ate no meat that had been sacrificed to idols would be to 1) become a vegetarian; 2) eat meat only from animals you raised yourself; 3) completely withdraw from the culture. Interestingly, none of these is Paul's counsel to the Christians in Corinth.

While the issue of food sacrificed to idols may not be relevant to us today, the principles Paul lays down are timeless in their relevance and application. There are just two principles I want to highlight today.

1. LOVE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN KNOWLEDGE

Here is the first principle: love is more important than knowledge. The Corinthians took pride in their knowledge. They said: "All of us possess knowledge" (8:1). But notice how Paul responds. He says in verse 1: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

Paul is not suggesting here that knowledge or the pursuit of it is unimportant in the Christian life. He is not saying that ignorance is bliss. Paul understood and appreciated the value of knowledge. But Paul also recognized that knowledge could lead to pride and that those who have greater knowledge in some area of life – or who think they have greater knowledge – can all too easily develop an arrogant, know-it-all attitude or an air of superiority in relation to those who are less enlightened. We all know people like that – people who use their knowledge to puff up themselves, to make themselves look good, and to put others down. Hopefully none of us is like that.

What Paul is saying is this: "Knowledge is important, but love is more important. Love trumps knowledge. That is what he says in 1 Corinthians 13:2. There he says:

If I have the gift of prophesy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

The old saying is true: People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Knowledge devoid of love is empty. It doesn't matter how vast or impressive my knowledge is. If I do not use my knowledge in sensitive, loving ways, with concern for the way it may impact my Christian brothers and sisters, then all the knowledge in the world is of no value.

Love is more important than knowledge. Some of the Corinthians were using their knowledge of the “nothingness” of idols to justify their freedom not only to buy the meat on the market but also to participate in public festivities where “idol meat” was served. Paul does not dispute their knowledge or their freedom. He simply reminds them of the supremacy of love.

What Paul says in Galatians 5:13-14 applies here:

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature. Rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

In His amazing grace God has given us glorious freedom in Christ. But this freedom is not an excuse to do whatever we want to do regardless of the teachings of God’s Word. And it is not a license to do whatever we want to do regardless of its effect on our brothers and sisters in Christ. As men and women who have been set free from our bondage to sin and guilt by Christ, we are to serve one another in love.

2. FREEDOM MUST NOT BE A STUMBLING BLOCK TO OTHERS

The second principle is this: We must not allow the exercise of our freedom to become a stumbling block to others. Notice what Paul says in verse 9. “Be careful that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.”

Understand that Paul is dealing here with what we would call the “gray areas” of Christian living. In the language of the EPC, these are the “non-essentials” in which Christians have liberty. He is not talking about things like adultery or child abuse, which are always wrong. An example of a non-essential “gray area” for Christians in our culture today would be the consumption of alcohol. Some Christians believe it is morally wrong and that all Christians should abstain from it completely. Others recognize that it is not inherently wrong, but is wrong if it leads to drunkenness (if a person drinks too much), if it leads to impaired driving or if it damages a weaker brother or sister in Christ. What we have to keep in mind in the exercise of our freedom in these “non-essential” areas is that what is safe for you in your life as a follower of Christ may not be safe for me. And vice versa.

We don’t live in isolation from one another. We are interconnected. Paul’s concern for the Corinthians was that some of them – “the strong” – in the exercise of their freedom would unintentionally cause some of their weaker brothers or sisters to stumble in their faith or even to sin. So he urged them not to act in any way that would lead others into sin. Since, as he says in verse 8, there is no inherent spiritual advantage in eating the meat nor any disadvantage in abstaining, concern for the spiritual well-being of one’s fellow Christians should take priority.

Paul speaks to the relationship between “the weak” and “the strong” in faith in much greater detail in Romans 14 and 15. Here is a bit of what Paul says there:

Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (14:13-17).

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food [or any non-essential]. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else that will cause your brother to fall... Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith. And everything that does not come from faith is sin (14:18-23).

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up (15:1-2).

We don't have to deal with the issue of meat sacrificed to idols, but we do deal with such issues as the use of alcohol and tobacco by Christians, proper and improper activities by Christians on the Lord's Day, how Christians should view fictional characters like Harry Potter as they delve into the world of sorcery and witchcraft, and a myriad of other questions. In all these things, our freedom in Christ is to be exercised with sensitivity and love.

Let me close with this. Years ago a group of Christians were having a picnic. One of those present was a man who had converted from Islam. A young woman brought a basket of sandwiches to him and offered him some. He asked what kind she had. She said: "I'm afraid all we have left are ham or pork."

"Don't you have any beef?" he asked. "No, they're all gone." "Then I won't have any," he said.

Knowing he was a Christian, she said to him: "You do know that as a Christian, you are freed from all those food restrictions, and you can eat ham or pork, or whatever, if you like?"

He said: "Yes, I know. I know I am free to eat pork, but I am also free not to eat it. I am still involved with my father's family back in the Middle East, and I know that when I go home once a year, and I come to my father's door, the first question he will ask me is:

“Have those infidels taught you to eat the filthy hog meat yet?” If I have to say to him: “Yes, father,” I will be banished from his home and have no further witness in it. But if I can say, as I have always been able to say: “No, father, no pork has ever passed my lips,” then I will have admittance to the family circle, and I am free to tell them of the joy I have found in Jesus Christ. Therefore I am free to eat, or I am free not to eat, as the case may be.”

And that is the case with us. Though we have been given tremendous freedom in Christ, we are also free not to exercise our freedom for the sake of love.

In the exercise of our freedom, may we serve one another in love, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.