

Take-Aways for Small Group Leaders to Consider

At first, I Corinthians 8:1-13 may seem to apply only to the first Christians in the church which Paul established in Corinth and not related to today's culture. We're no longer facing the situation of eating meat that was sacrificed in pagan rituals, as was commonplace in Corinth; Yet, Paul's detailed response to the problem indicates that it was important to the Corinthians. His response also illustrates areas of concern that are as applicable today as they were then. He casts a strong light on *balancing freedom and responsibility with several other areas of importance connected to that*.

Richard B. Hays has an excellent commentary that gives helpful background and thoughtful reflections on this passage. He groups his reflections into four sections that provide a background for applications to daily Christian living. Below are selected quotations from Hays.¹

1. Boundaries between church and culture

"Can Christians fit into the social world of their surrounding culture? Or must they withdraw altogether from the social world of the surrounding culture? . . . Where are the lines to be drawn between acceptable accommodation to the realities of the culture and unacceptable compromise? Questions such as these always arise for the church in a missionary setting (such as first-century Corinth where the gospel encounters a new cultural context). . . . But such problems are hardly confined to churches in non-Western cultures. Similar questions must also be posed to Christian churches that have grown comfortably familiar with their cultural setting."

2. Class divisions in the church

"Paul does not address this problem directly in I Corinthians 8, but by reading between the lines we have seen that the idol meat problem had a socioeconomic dimension. . . . Paul places the onus for flexibility on those with more education and economic resources. . . . he calls the strong to surrender what they understand as their legitimate prerogatives for the sake of the weak."

3. Love trumps knowledge

"The central message of this chapter is a simple one: Love is more important than knowledge. Rather than asserting rights and privileges, we are to shape our actions toward edification of our brothers and sisters in the community of faith."

4. The danger of destruction through idolatry

"The 'stumbling block principle' is often erroneously invoked to place limits on the behavior of some Christians whose conduct offends other Christians with stricter behavioral standards. . . . The effect of such reasoning is to hold the entire Christian community hostage to the standards of the most narrow-minded and legalistic members of the church. Clearly, this is not what Paul intended. He is concerned in I Corinthians 8 about weaker believers being 'destroyed' by being drawn away from the church and back into idol worship.

A corollary of this point, however, is that idolatry can actually lead to destruction. The seductive lure of idolatry is real, and the destructive power of the pagan world is real. . . . If we are tempted to be casual about dalliances with the idols that rule our culture's symbolic world . . . we would do well to reread I Corinthians 8 and consider the possible risks for those among us who are seeking to escape the pull of these forces."

A note about "The Weak": Richard B. Hays states, "Some members of the fledgling church are so accustomed to thinking of the idols as real that they cannot eat the idol meat without conjuring up the whole symbolic world of idol worship; they are dragged back into that world and so 'defiled' (v.7). (This shows, by the way, that 'the weak' about whom Paul writes here are not Jewish Christians but Gentile converts from paganism; they are the ones who would be 'accustomed to idols.')[verses 10-12 show us that] Paul's primary concern here is not the consumption of meat sold in the marketplace (cf.10:25-26); rather, he is worried about having weak Christians drawn back into the temple, into the powerful world of the pagan cult, which was in we must always remember, the dominant symbolic world in which the Corinthian Christians lived."

¹ Richard B. Hays. *First Corinthians*, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2011, 134-147

SUMMARY AND REVIEW

1. Take 5-10 minutes to discuss last week's sermon, "The Gospel and Singleness."

INTRO TO THE TEXT:

Paul continues his response to the Corinthians' letter in chapter 8 as he addresses the problem of eating food sacrificed to idols, a controversial issue to the churches in Asia Minor near the end of the first century.

Instead of giving a simple answer to the question of eating meat from animals offered as pagan sacrifices, Paul reframes the issue. His response focuses on balancing freedom and responsibility. Within that framework, he uses this conflict to address boundaries between church and culture, class divisions in the church, the relationship between love and knowledge, and the danger of destruction through idolatry (see "take-aways" for more info on these boundaries).

READ I Corinthians 8:1-13

ANALYZE THE TEXT

1. Why do you think there was a controversy in the church at Corinth regarding "food sacrificed to idols"?
2. How is Paul's response about knowledge (vs. 1-3) related to eating meat sacrificed to idols? What does "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up," mean to you? What problems with knowledge are indicated in these verses?
3. What does Paul say about idols in vs. 4-6? About God? How are these verses related to Paul's earlier comments about knowledge?
4. Paul considers the impact of exercising freedom in vs. 7-13. How would you define a person with a weak conscience? What are examples of how this condition is shown today?
5. What is a "stumbling block to the weak"? (vs. 9-13) How can the exercise of one's freedom be a stumbling block? What damage can it do?
6. How does Paul's response in vs. 10 show Christian love?

A FEW THINGS TO CONSIDER:

Most of the meat sold in Corinth markets came from animals that had been sacrificed to pagan idols. Some Corinthian Christians believed there was no problem in eating that meat because the "other gods" didn't exist. However, others thought eating this meat meant taking part in a pagan rite, and it violated their conscience. Paul applies the law of Christian love regarding legitimate personal freedoms in the instance of pagan meat in markets, but forbids eating at pagan feasts.

In vs. 7-13, Paul says not everyone knows they have freedom to eat the sacrificed meat. He cautions the "knowledgeable" Corinthians not to exercise their freedom in a way that would cause the weak Christians to stumble, but to instead show Christian love by applying self-imposed limits on their freedom.

The Corinthians' struggle with how to balance freedom and responsibility is still with us. Deciding to what extent our actions are influenced by the views of others is an ongoing concern. Richard Hays says that when applying the concept of the weaker believers today, we should be careful to use Paul's analogies only in situations that "might actually jeopardize the faith and salvation of others by leading the weak to emulate high-risk behaviors."

APPLY

1. How much do you let other people's views control your actions?
2. As a Christian, what guidelines do you follow in balancing freedom with responsibility?
3. How do you distinguish matters of indifference from matters that are important?
4. What do you do with weakness? How do we preserve the integrity of the church in a way that protects weaker members from destructive temptations?
5. What boundaries between church and culture are most troubling to you? How can knowledge and love work together to address your concerns?

MEMORIZE I Corinthians 8:6

References: Richard B. Hays. *First Corinthians*, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2011, 134-147; Gordon Fee and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. *The Eerdmans Companion to the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011, p 653.