

Imperfect Church; Perfect Saviour

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Date: 27 October 2024

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[0 : 00] I recently heard a story of an old Canadian man, Canadian man, who became a Christian. In his pre-Christian life, he'd been a gambler. He used to bet large sums of money on games of drafts, or checkers, as the Americans call it. The money he actually lost jeopardized his family.

When this man became a Christian, he was invited to the minister's house for dinner, after which the minister took out a drafts board and challenged him to a game of drafts.

The old man politely refused. The minister was very confused until this old man told the minister his story. You see, for him, drafts reminded him of the life he'd left behind, and seeing a drafts board was a temptation to return to the thrill and the adrenaline of gambling.

From that moment onward, the minister never played drafts in this man's presence again, because he didn't want to place a stumbling block in the way of this man's Christian discipleship.

Now, the lesson of that story is not to avoid playing drafts with old Canadian men. The lesson of the story is to love our fellow Christians enough not to put stumbling blocks in their way. The lesson is love. In 1 Corinthians 8 verse 13, by way of response to this question, the Corinthian Christians have asked them about whether it's okay or not for them to eat food sacrificed to idols. The apostle Paul challenges them not to think of it merely in terms of what is right or wrong on a gray moral issue, but in terms of love for their fellow Christians. The lesson is love.

[2 : 02] It is morally right to play drafts, but it's morally wrong to play drafts with an ex-gambler who's tempted to return to gambling by playing drafts, because it's not a loving thing to put a stumbling block in his way. The issue is not so much what's right or what's wrong. The issue is loving or unloving.

The lesson is love. What do you think are some of the potential stumbling blocks we can place in each other's way, and how should we think about them? How can we build each other up in faith and love rather than tearing each other down? Well, Paul constructs his argument in three stages. First, love and knowledge from verse 1 through 3. Then, knowledge and reality verses 4 through 6. And then, love and weakness in verse 7 through 13.

So, first of all, from verse 1 to 3, love and knowledge. Love and knowledge. In the early church, every prospective church member went through a catechism class.

And perhaps it's to that Paul is referring here when he talks about knowledge. So, knowledge here is that body of truth which made up the central doctrines of the Christian gospel as they were taught to new believers. These are truths about the faith.

[3 : 42] Truths about who God is, who Jesus is, who we are, what Jesus has done, what salvation is, how we are to live as Christians. So, the knowledge to which Paul is referring are truths about.

I've sat in many fellowships where powerful men talk of truths they know much about. They tend to be theological truths which require the deep study of the Bible or Christian books.

These men were experts. And they let us know they were experts. They gathered around them an adoring group of acolytes.

And they wowed them all with their theological speculations on how they could link one passage of the Bible to another to make 2 plus 2 equal 5.

The problem, of course, with knowledge about is that it does not necessarily mean knowledge of. The devil is a more knowledgeable theologian than any of us.

[4 : 54] But he doesn't have a living, growing, loving relationship with Jesus Christ through faith. Just because we know about God doesn't say we know God any more than knowing about someone by studying their profile on Wikipedia means that we know them personally.

To know about Jesus is not the same as knowing Jesus. In general, the men to whom I referred a bit earlier were puffed up with their knowledge.

They were often dismissive of any other view but their own. They were, if I'm being judgmental, which I'm not usually, arrogant, self-important, and highly judgmental. Their knowledge had puffed them up. It made them proud and gave them an exaggerated opinion of their self-importance. Paul highlights the problem with basing our Christianity on mere knowledge in verse 2.

If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know what he ought to know. At best, our knowledge of God here on earth is incomplete.

[6 : 13] If I learned only one thing from gaining my PhD in chemistry, it is not how much but how little I know about chemistry.

Because true knowledge always leads to humility, not pride. True knowledge of God leads to humility, not pride.

But furthermore, and this is central to Paul's argument, as I said earlier, knowing about God does not mean to say that one knows God. If anyone really knows God, he can't but be filled with love for him and for other Christians.

Knowing God supersedes knowing about God. When one knows God, God begins a work of transformation within us to make us people not of pride, but of humility and love.

We love God. We love other Christians. How can we be sure we know God? It is that we love him and we love other Christians.

[7 : 26] It's not that knowledge is unimportant. We must know the body of truths we call the gospel. We must know about the God in whom we are to believe. But love supersedes knowledge.

The knowledge is the foundation upon which we build our love for him and for other Christians. Love is the superstructure above ground. Knowledge is the foundation below ground.

When a man parades how much he knows about God, it may well be a sign that he doesn't know God at all. Rather than sit in the seat of honor, he should follow his master's example, take off his outer garments, wrap a towel around his waist, and wash the feet of those Christians gathered around him.

True knowledge of God always humbles a man and fills him both with love for God and for other Christians. He no longer insists upon his right to play drafts with old Canadian men.

But he willingly and lovingly refrains. Let me offer an application of this principle of love superseding knowledge.

[8 : 43] Rather than sit around and discuss speculative theological gray areas, which is something we used to do all the time, let's talk together about how we can express our love for each other in practical ways.

How we can serve one another. How we can pray for one another. By all means, let's talk about what's plainly revealed in the Bible to us. But rather than talk about how many angels can dance on top of a pinhead, let's talk about how to lovingly apply the truths of the gospel into our lives at home. At work, university, remembering that love supersedes knowledge. For it's only those who love God who are known of God.

Knowledge and love. Well, secondly, from verse 4 to 6, we have knowledge and reality. Knowledge and reality. Well, having set this principle, love supersedes knowledge, the apostle Paul now zeroes in on the question he's been asked by the Corinthians.

Namely, is it okay to eat food sacrificed to idols? Now, this was a live issue in Corinth at the time. The city was known for its many temples to different gods.

[10 : 07] Meals were eaten in these temples with the food having been devoted to the gods who worshipped there. And over these meals, business deals were conducted.

And community relationships were cemented. To be a successful businessman in Corinth or to have any influence in the community, you needed to be present at these meals.

But of course, for the Christian, the problem is that being present at these meals meant you had to eat that food which had already been devoted to the idol.

In verses 4 through 6, Paul tells it straight. There are no other gods. There are no other gods. And therefore, to eat food which has been devoted to them is a matter of indifference.

He says, we know an idol has no real existence and that there is no God but one. The gods worshipped in these temples in Corinth are not real gods at all.

[11 : 08] They don't exist. They're not real. It is impossible to devote food to a god who does not exist. So the food laid before someone in a pagan temple is just food with no other qualities than it

nourishes our bodies and it tastes great.

It is no different from the food we eat in a restaurant. The gods to whom it's been devoted are no gods at all. There is only one god. This is the Jewish Shema which every Jewish child learned from infancy and which we as Christians affirm.

There is no god but one. Paul continues by placing the reality of the case together with carefully guided applications. First he says, Notice how Paul calls God Father.

Such a descriptive word detailing for us God's tender care of his loved children. And then secondly he says, Again notice how Paul describes Jesus as Lord.

Lord here being another name for God. He talks of him as Jesus Christ. Directing us of course to how we have been saved through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

[12:34] Jesus. This is the reality. There is no god but one. And the god who is has loves us tenderly and sacrificially.

And Paul's really saying here, Of course it's okay for a Christian to eat food sacrificed to an idol. There's nothing wrong with it given that these idols have no existence and the god we worship alone is real.

We have every right as Christians to eat food sacrificed to idols. It is lawful, permissible for a Christian to drink alcohol. It is lawful for a Christian to go to a dance.

It is lawful for a Christian to play drafts. We're doing nothing wrong by engaging in such practices. In fact, we may even argue that such practices are good for us. But we must always remember, as Paul insists twice in verse 6, We don't exist for ourselves.

Because we exist for God. As long as we can do these things for His glory and for our good, as long as these things aren't forbidden in Scripture, we can lawfully engage in them.

[13:43] That's knowledge and reality. True state of affairs. Let me offer a live example of truth and reality in practice. Our missionary friend, Duncan Peters, works in Asian outreach.

And he often attends dialogue meetings in Glasgow's mosques or is asked to talk about Christianity in these places. So he goes there to these mosques because he wants to engage with the South Asian Islamic community for Christ.

That's why he's there. There is nothing wrong with him doing that because the God to whom these mosques have been dedicated does not exist.

It's not real. That mosque is just another building, the same as the building next door, which may be a shop or a restaurant or a house. There's a good example of knowledge and reality in the context of 1 Corinthians 8.

And it means that we need to pray for Duncan as he works for the good and for the evangelization of the South Asian community in Glasgow. So, knowledge and reality.

[14:57] So we've seen love and knowledge. Remember, love supersedes knowledge. And then knowledge and reality. There's no other gods. No problem with eating food sacrificed to idols.

But then thirdly, we see in verse 7 through 13, love and weakness. Love and weakness. So far, we've laid down the principle of love superseding knowledge and also that of knowledge and reality. Now, Paul, he molds these two principles together in a mastery discussion of whether the Corinthians should eat food sacrificed to idols and of whether we should play drafts with old Canadian men.

Between verses 7 and 13, he talks of two things. Scandal and surrender. Scandal and surrender. Scandal, first of all. However, not all possess this knowledge.

There were many Christians in the Corinthian church, probably from a Jewish background, who were certain that these pagan gods did not exist and therefore there was nothing wrong with eating food sacrificed to an idol.

[16:08] But there were others, probably from a Gentile background, for whom eating food sacrificed to idols held painful memories and evoked unhelpful associations.

Before they had become Christians, some members of this Corinthian church, again I say probably from a Gentile background, had engaged in feasts at these pagan temples.

They had worshipped these pagan gods. They remembered what it was like to bow down and worship a pagan god as though it was God.

In fact, despite the fact that they had become Christians, they were finding it difficult to shake the thought that perhaps, just perhaps, maybe, there was an element of reality to these pagan gods.

Sorry, sorry, that's me. And so to rid themselves of the temptation to go back to their pre-Christian pagan lives, they avoided going anywhere near these temples and avoided eating food sacrificed to idols.

[17 : 14] They wanted to live faithful Christian lives, which for them meant turning their backs completely on their previous pagan practices. Because for them, these pagan practices were a temptation to return to their pre-Christian lives.

It's like someone who, before they became a Christian, was an alcoholic. They want to live for Christ and for His glory. But because they know how weak they are toward alcohol, will not touch a drop of the stuff, nor will they go anywhere near a pub.

They remember only too well what it was like to be a slave to drink. These Christians who don't want to eat food sacrificed to idols, or don't want to drink alcohol, or don't want to go into a pagan temple, are four times called weak in our passage.

They've got a weak conscience. It's not about what's real, or what's right. It is that because of their past, they are susceptible to temptations to which other Christians are not.

So they turn their backs on food sacrificed to idols, or alcohol, or plain drafts. The problem is this.

[18 : 32] What of those who, knowing the reality of there being nothing wrong with eating food sacrificed to idols, because there's no such thing as other gods, nothing wrong with drinking alcohol, nothing wrong with plain drafts, assert their right to do these things.

Who say, well, I'm not letting his weak conscience determine what I can or can't do. If I want to eat food sacrificed to an idol, I'll just do it. If I want to shoot the breeze in a pub, I'll do it.

If I want to play drafts, I'll do it. Of course, all the time forgetting that the I who wants to, we don't exist for the I who wants to, but for the God for whom we exist.

Paul uses the phrase stumbling block, or stumble three times in these verses. It's the Greek word from which we get our English word scandal, scandalizo.

The root meaning of the word scandal is found in the world of hunting and trapping. So a trap is set to catch an animal. A net or snare is tied by a rope to a small twig.

[19 : 44] And when that twig is disturbed by a passing animal, the net falls, the snare tightens, and the animal's trapped. That small twig was called the scandal.

It's the mechanism which triggers the trap which leads to the animal's death. Doesn't that person who asserts their right to eat food sacrificed to idols because they know the truth that there is only one God, doesn't that person realize that they are setting a trap for their weaker brother?

Even as they boldly eat that food, the weaker Christian watching on is tempted by the allure of his previous life. Even as they boldly drink their whiskey because they say, I'm going to do it, and it will stop me doing it, the weaker Christian looking on, tempted by the smell of the whiskey, is tempted to return to his pre-Christian alcoholism.

Even as they play drafts, the weaker Christian watching on is tempted to go out and put a bet on who's going to win.

Now, for us, right? Eating food sacrificed to an idol, drinking alcohol, or playing draft, it's no big deal. But for that weak Christian, he is tempted by what Paul calls in verse 7 former associations.

[21 : 10] He's tempted to go back to his former life. The late Colin McKay and I, at times, used to share a wee dram, a wee top of whiskey.

And on those occasions, Colin would say to me, he was such a wise man, such a wonderful man, he used to say to me, Colin, he would say, I know who I can drink with.

I know who I can drink with. By that little phrase, he was challenging me to remember that there are those we should not drink with because of their susceptibility to alcoholism.

To offer a drink to them is to set a trap for them, to tempt them to go back to their pre-Christian state. Let me apply this in a relevant setting.

Hopefully it's relevant. There's a sense in which, you know what, every one of us this week has eaten food sacrificed to an idol. Whenever we get an Indian takeaway, the meat is halal meat, which means not only has it been slaughtered in a certain way, but that an Islamic prayer has been said over it by an imam.

[22 : 27] It is literally food sacrificed to an idol. Now we think nothing of it because we have no previous association with Islam, and we know that our God alone is real and not theirs.

But what if in our church we have a newly converted couple from an Islamic background over to our house for a meal? What are the implications of serving them halal meat over which an Islamic

prayer has been made?

We would not wish by our thoughtless action to do anything to tempt them to turn their backs on Christ. We should not play drafts with old Canadian men.

Scandal. But then secondly and finally, surrender. Surrender. You know they say knowledge is power. Knowledge gives us rights. Because we know the truth that there are no other gods but our God, we are free to eat any food we like.

It is right to eat food sacrificed to idols that's allowed. It's our right to drink alcohol. It's our right to play drafts. But what if these rights of ours become stumbling blocks to weaker Christians watching on and tempts them to return to their pre-Christian state?

[23 : 43] What Paul calls in verse 11 the weak person being destroyed. What kind of love is that? Remember from our first point.

Love supersedes knowledge. What we know is less important than that we love God and love our fellow Christians. In this case, by putting a stumbling block in the way of those weaker Christians, we are sinning against our brother by wounding his conscience.

We are sinning against him and more seriously, because he belongs to Jesus and is loved by Jesus, we are sinning against Jesus. us. By asserting our right to do something which is morally permissible, because it causes another Christian to stumble, we are sinning against the Lord.

Get that? By asserting our right to do something that is morally neutral or even right, because that thing causes another Christian to stumble, we are sinning against the Lord.

We're sinning by doing what's right. The act of eating food sacrificed to idols is not sinful, but because we're doing it in full view of someone who has a weak conscience and is tempted by our actions to return to a previous pre-Christian life, it becomes sinful.

[25 : 06] And why is that? Because we are not showing them love. We are not loving them, but we're setting that animal trap for them instead.

Remember, for the first few verses, we show that we really know God by loving Him and our fellow Christians. If we do not love our fellow Christians because we're setting a trap for them, it shows that we are puffing ourselves up and not building them up.

Paul finally, therefore, answers the Corinthians question in verse 13. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat lest I make my brother stumble.

What he's saying here is that because other Christians are his brothers and sisters in Christ and he loves them, he loves them enough to deny himself his own rights.

The minister I began the sermon with, he loved that old Canadian Christian man enough to put his drafts board away. Not a big deal, right? The Christian loves his alcoholic brother enough never to drink whiskey in his presence again.

[26 : 30] He surrenders his rights because he loves his fellow Christian. Let me give you one last application before we close. I don't advise this, as you know.

I don't like it. But you know, we do have, it is permissible for a Christian to go to a nightclub. I don't think it's right. But it's permissible.

And it's permissible to have a couple of drinks. And it's permissible to listen to loud music. But what if there's a young Christian who knows that we're doing that? Listen up, young folk, right?

This is a temptation for you especially. What if there's a young Christian who knows that we are doing that? Going to a nightclub, having a couple of drinks, having a dance. In his previous pre-Christian life, he used to go to nightclubs.

He used to drink. He used to dance. He'd pick up a girl, take her home, and you know where that leads. Our going to a nightclub makes him think, well, okay.

[27 : 36] It's okay to go to nightclub, drink, dance to loud music. Next time, he goes with us. Before you know where you are, he's back in the whole scene again.

He's back doing what he did before he became a Christian. Oh, your right was to go to the nightclub and have a couple of drinks and have a dance.

That's fine. But your right has caused him to stumble. You haven't loved him. You've sinned against Christ by saying, I have the right to do this.

Why then should we put the weaknesses of old Canadian men before our own rights when after all, you know we're brought up in a society which is all about rights.

That's my right. Why should we put the rights of other Christians before our own? It is because the Lord Jesus Christ gave up all his rights to the glory and blessedness of heaven because he loved

us.

[28 : 48] He gave up his rights to life and peace because he loved us. He gave up his right to an earthly crown because he loved us.

He died on the cross as our sacrifice for sin because he put us first and loved us. That is why we should put the weaknesses and consciences of other Christians before our own. That is why we should never play drafts with old Canadian men. God bless and